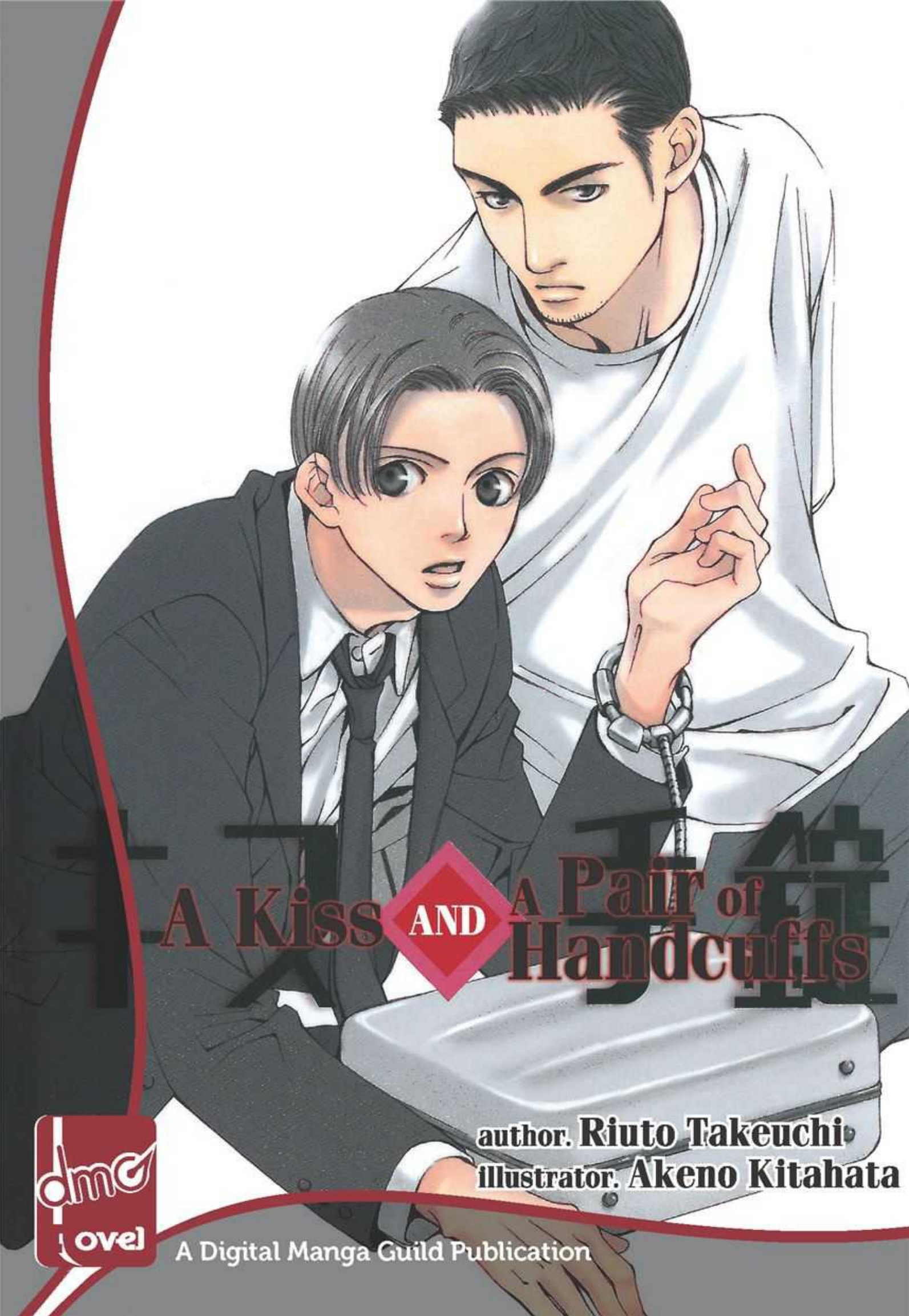
A Kiss AND A Pair of Handcuffs
author. Riuto Takeuchi
illustrator. Akeno Kitahata
dmg
ovel
A Digital Manga Guild Publication

RIUTO TAKEUCHI
PRESENTS

story
たけうちりうと

illustration
北畠あけ乃

キスと手錠

SHY NOVELS

"Alright. You can rub me any way you want, Ren."
The first gentle kiss took place in the steamy, foggy bathroom.

A Kiss and a Pair of Handcuffs

Story by

Riuto Takeuchi

Illustrations by

Akeno Kitahata

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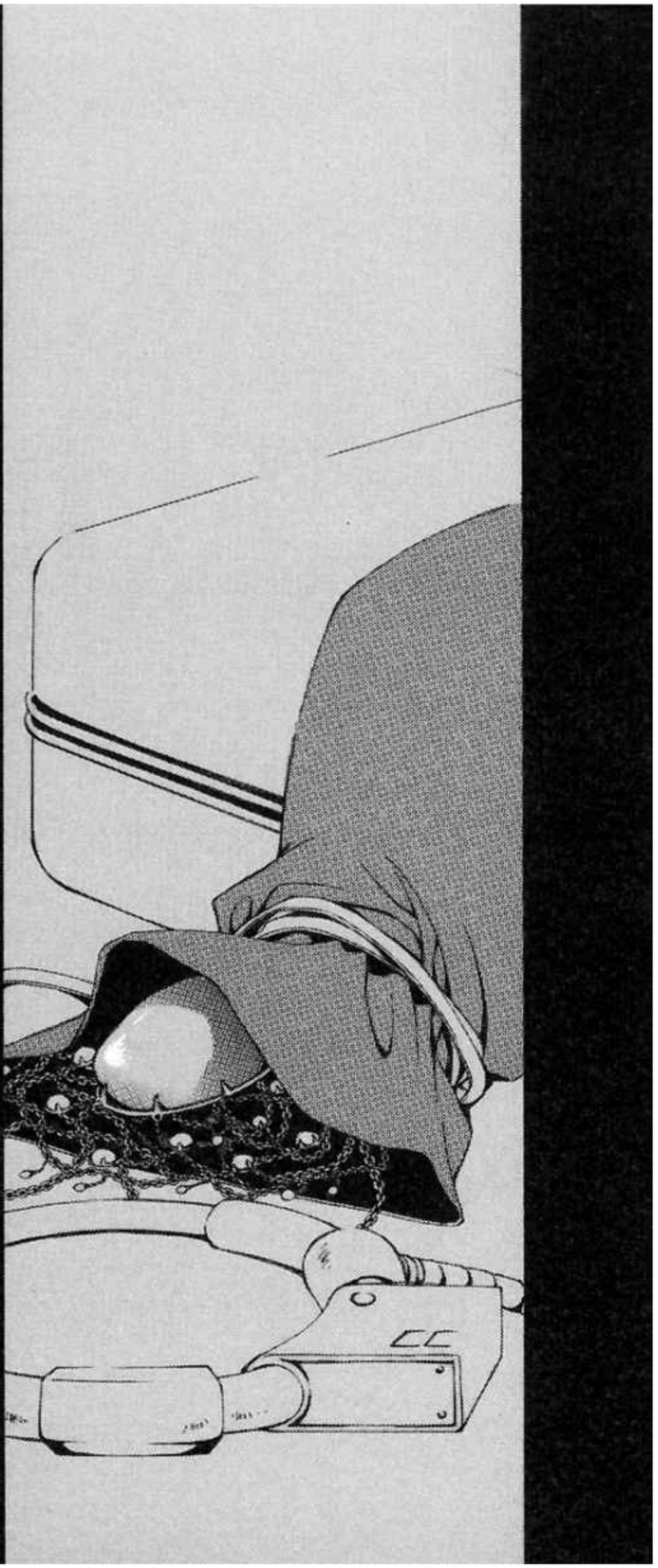
キスと手錠



A Kiss and a Pair of Handcuffs

It was the worst Sunday ever.

Kazutaka Yui leaned against the wall of the cargo space and sighed. His left wrist was handcuffed and not with just any ordinary handcuffs either, their design was peculiar. The cuff for the right wrist was inside a chromium alloy attaché case. Incidentally, the key to the handcuffs was also inside the attaché case. Unless you opened the case, you couldn't remove the handcuffs.

The attaché case was sitting on a seat. It gleamed black as if it were flaunting its existence. Inside the attaché case was some merchandise that Kazutaka would never be able to afford, not even if ten of him worked their entire lives.

Kazutaka had only seen a black bag. He didn't know what color or shape the goods inside were. Shīno had only told him that the contents were some jewelry.

"It's probably worth about twenty billion yen," Shīno had said with a nonchalant smile.

Why do I have to be the one transporting such valuable goods? If it's that important, take it yourself, Shīno. These thoughts ran through Kazutaka's mind as he rode towards the delivery point. The destination for both Kazutaka and the attaché case was the police department.

Kazutaka had just spoken to Shīno, who somehow managed to convince Kazutaka that he had to do this for him. However, Kazutaka couldn't help feeling that there was something wrong.

"You're asking me to do this by myself. What if something goes wrong?" Kazutaka had asked him inside Shīno Jewelry's vault. Shīno had given him a cheery smile and replied, "Nothing will go wrong. It's just that you're the only one I can trust with a task like this, Yui."

True. Kazutaka would never even dream about taking the jewelry and running

away, but what was at stake was too valuable. When he'd heard the words twenty billion yen, Kazutaka had nearly wet his pants. Normally, people would insure goods like these and hire a well-established security company to transport them.

Shīno seemed to be of the opinion that Kazutaka was being ridiculous.

"Don’t worry. I’ve already told the police that I’d be having some jewelry delivered because I suspected that they were stolen goods. Please, Yui. Transport them to the police department. It’s only a 15 minute drive and it’s the middle of the night. You are the only one I can ask to do such a crazy task. Come on, please?"

Shīno and Kazutaka went way back, so Kazutaka felt unable to turn down his plea any longer. That was how Kazutaka ended up in a car dispatched by a security firm with his hand chained to an attaché case containing priceless jewelry. Shīno had said that he would be coming to the police department in a different car.

There’s definitely something wrong. Kazutaka sighed again. It was a huge amount of stress to carry twenty billion yen worth of goods, even if it was just for 15 minutes. *How can Shīno stand it? Selling and buying stuff like this every day? He’s got some nerves*. Half appalled and half impressed, Kazutaka thought of Shīno’s straight A student-like looks. Shīno was the owner of a jewelry store that generated millions in annual revenue. *He has to have some major balls. Do people get used to such huge figures when they handle super expensive goods all the time? This sort of business is definitely not for me*, Kazutaka thought.

Taking out his cell phone from his chest pocket, Kazutaka looked at the display. There weren't any messages or calls received. The security company’s car seemed to block all transmissions and the vehicle had no antenna attached. The time read 9:58 p.m. It had only been a scant five minutes since Kazutaka left Shīno Jewelry. Only ten more minutes to get to the police station. Since the car didn’t have any windows, Kazutaka couldn't even tell where they were.

“We’re almost there, Yui-san,” the driver informed him through the intercom. “There’s no traffic this time of the day so we’ll be at the police headquarters in

about five minutes or so."

"Ah, that's great. Thank you."

"Once you deliver the goods to headquarters, I'll drive you home," the driver reassured in a gentle tone and turned off the intercom. He must have been trying to ease Kazutaka's tension. Kazutaka had a thing about gentle voices. Normally he was surrounded by people with high-pitched voices, obnoxious voices, and threatening tones, so Kazutaka felt relieved when hearing caring, gentle tones.

I should eat that Cup-o-Noodles when I get home. I've already poured in the hot water. It will have gone all soggy by now. Oh well. I can dump it into a pot, add some more water, and heat it up. I'll just shove it into my mouth and go to bed straight after. I'm so tired; it's been an exhausting day today. This has got to be the most tiring Sunday I have had in several years.

Kazutaka removed the watch from his handcuffed left wrist and checked the time, 9:59 p.m. Two hours remaining until the end came at last to this tiring Sunday.

At 9:00 p.m. sharp, Ren turned off the power on the grinding machine. The cutting machine on another row over also stopped with a hissing sound.

"I'm going home for the day, boss," his employee informed him. The young man had just started working at this factory after graduating from a technical high school last year.

"Thank you for staying so late on a Sunday," Ren replied and the young man smiled.

"Oh, this is fun for me. It gives me more chances to handle the machines."

His face was dirty with machine oil, but he still had a dazzling smile. Atobe Manufacturing was a small family run operation consisting only of the owner and one employee. Machines and tools do not smile. Ren, the owner, seldom smiled. The smiles from the barely 19 year old worker were the only sparks of cheer around the place.

Ren turned off the factory's main power, saw the worker off, locked up, and then went into the small room he used as living quarters.

Ren Atobe's late night snack for the past year invariably had been Cup-o-Noodles soup. He took out a package of the instant noodle soup from the cupboard and poured in some hot water. He then set a timer for three minutes before taking off his overalls to take a shower. When Ren came back from the shower, drying his body with a towel, the timer went off, telling him that the noodle soup was ready. He sat at his desk and put his hands together. Before picking up a pair of disposable chopsticks, Ren politely bowed, giving thanks for the meal.

Ren's father had passed away the previous year. His father had been very strict about etiquette and matters of politeness. Even after Ren had turned 20, his father had been known to throw a punch if he did not approve of his son's table manners. Ren's father, in other words, was almost like a stereotypical, mean old mother-in-law. *Humph, old man. I hope you kick the bucket soon*. Ren used to secretly think that and he thought that maybe his wish had been granted by some mean-spirited deity. One morning, Ren found his father's body rigid as if he were at attention. His father was staring up at the ceiling and already cold. It had been such a sudden death.

I'm sorry, Dad, Ren had apologized countless times since. *It's all because of my stupid wish, I'm sorry*. *Please rest peacefully in heaven*, Ren would think as he bowed over the Buddhist altar over and over.

Ren may have inherited machines and a business, but his life was lacking any sense of joy and fulfillment. Although he did not need anyone else to keep the business running, Ren decided to hire an employee to try and change things. That was how Ren came to find the boy, who was happy so far as he was handling machines all day, from a local technical high school.

Ren's business was making machine parts. It was a small-scale factory but had a very good reputation for accuracy and a low defect rate. His authoritarian father had trained Ren well while building up his business, which was based on trust.

His father was not smiling in the picture on the Buddhist altar. The funeral director had asked in vain for a nicer picture.

"Don’t you have at least one picture of your father with a smile on his face?" he'd asked since in the picture Ren’s father was glaring at the world, looking stern and dignified. He was the very persona of a highly disciplined man. "If you can do it today, do not wait until tomorrow." That was one of his father’s teachings. A small factory like this one had to be tough on itself in order to survive. It wouldn't have very many clients otherwise. First comes work, second comes trust. Sincerity, friendliness, etiquette, *etc.* came third or fourth. Ren didn’t remember the exact order of importance. Even his late father had sometimes gotten the order mixed up, so Ren had decided that they were probably equally important.

Ren scanned an industrial magazine as he slurped up his soup. He didn't take on jobs for mass produced parts. Most of his clients were research and development departments that would order one-of-a-kind parts for precision instruments. From research and development to commercialization, the industrial world always looked for new technology. No matter what kind of part was ordered, manufacturers had to try their best to meet the specifications asked for. Unless they did, the next order might never come. It was a tough world, so Ren made sure he kept on top of things even though his business was on such a small scale.

Ren glanced up at the calendar. It had suddenly occurred to him that his long-time friend, Yuri Fuwa, had told Ren that he was doing his last job tonight. Thinking of Fuwa made Ren's plain Cup-o-Noodles suddenly taste both sweet and sour. Fuwa was a good friend of Ren's. He was gentle, calm, and very considerate. They didn't get to see each other much anymore for several reasons, but Fuwa always contacted Ren whenever he came back to Japan. Whenever he knew Fuwa was in Japan, Ren felt restless. *Is he in some kind of trouble? Does he need my help?* Ren always wanted to call to find out the answers to these questions, but he always managed to restrain himself.

Ren had broken up with Fuwa, so he knew he shouldn't dwell on their past relationship too much. If Fuwa reached out and asked for help, Ren was more than ready to drop everything to do so. But it was not in Ren’s personality to

push himself forward to ask, “Is there anything I can help you with, Yuri?”

Fuwa’s side business was not something you could talk about openly. Although his gig could in some ways be thought of as helpful, it dealt with matters that were in somewhat of a gray area. Technically, Yuri Fuwa was a thief but he did not steal things for personal gain. Fuwa would sell the stolen goods and then use the funds for a good cause. Fuwa never put any of the profits from a job into his own pocket.

Obviously, it was a risky business. Ren had wanted Fuwa to call it quits. As if Fuwa had sensed this, he'd called Ren last week. Fuwa had told him that his next job would be his last one and that he would find a part-time job at a convenience store.

"Come back to me," Ren had wanted to say, but he didn't. Fuwa had a new boyfriend now. His name was Bud West, a man with a multinational background and who occasionally had done business with Fuwa.

Ren had to admit that Bud West was a man of a higher caliber with a keener mind and deeper thoughts, as well as being more passionate about love than himself. Ren was no match for him. It was only natural for Fuwa to be crazy about Bud. There was nothing Ren could do to stop it. Ren had to keep some distance and live on as just a man from Fuwa’s past.

Ren put his hands together one more time, giving thanks for the meal as he finished his noodle soup. He rinsed the container well, stacked the containers from yesterday and the day before together, and threw them into the recycling bin. At Atobe Manufacturing, even the trash was strictly separated.

Afterwards, Ren sat down on the sofa bed. It was his habit to watch the nine, ten, or eleven o’clock news while reading the newspaper or one of his industrial magazines. Just as he picked up the TV remote control, the phone next to the sofa rang.

Hm? Ren stared at the phone. He got the sense that something awful might have happened. Ren stretched out his arm and picked up the phone.

Kazutaka was still sitting inside a transport vehicle with no windows. He was in

the cargo space of a transport vehicle specifically made for shipping valuables and cash. The vehicle was normally used by banks and credit unions to transport cash, but today, it was carrying an attaché case and Kazutaka. Or rather, it was carrying the super expensive jewelry inside the attaché case. Kazutaka was only riding along.

Kazutaka Yui was a special education teacher. He taught elementary and middle school students who were school-phobic. He had taught at a public middle school for three years before asking the Minamihama City Board of Education to transfer him to his current position where there were all kinds of school-phobic children. Study manuals and teaching guidelines were totally useless in dealing with these kids. What was important was to understand each individual's personality and state of mind in order to develop a teaching method suited for each particular child.

Many of the children were depressed and had trouble coming to terms with themselves as being "those kids who couldn't go to school." Mere words of encouragement were nowhere near enough.

Take it easy. *Just take a tiny step at a time*. *You don't have to finish this today; you can work on it tomorrow. Let's just enjoy the day today*. Those were Kazutaka's trademark phrases, phrases he'd developed over the past two years. Kazutaka did not look like a teacher. He didn't act like one either, so children felt at ease with him. Unfortunately, this also meant that Kazutaka was far from being an authority figure in anyone's eyes. Kids would tease him saying things like, "You're so cute. How come you don't have a girlfriend?" Fellow teachers would say, "Oh, it's you, Yui-sensei. I thought you were one of the students for a moment." Kazutaka simply had a baby face that seemed to invite this sort of attention.

So why was Kazutaka in the security company's car, transporting jewelry to police headquarters? It was because of his so-called unsavory ties. Ever since high school, Kazutaka had been surrounded by friends who depended on him, always pleading, "Please, Kazutaka. I've got no one else to turn to." He never could bring himself to refuse even though he ended up paying the consequences many, many times for agreeing.

His old high school classmate, Shīno, had begged Kazutaka to do today's job.

Kazutaka had wanted to opt out if possible. But when Shīno had said, "You are the only one I can count on", Kazutaka once more found himself unable to refuse.

Shīno would have liked to have some reliable employees who he could place his trust in. But shortly after he took over the business, there were a couple of incidents in which some of his employees made off with high-priced valuables. Because of this, Shīno had become nervous to the point of having diarrhea whenever an important job came up. Kazutaka therefore did not have the heart to say no to Shīno's pleading.

Besides, this was no ordinary transport task of carrying jewelry from the main office to a branch store. According to Shīno, a first time customer came in earlier this evening. That customer entrusted some goods to Shīno. When Shīno examined them, he suspected they might be stolen goods. Since he didn't think it was right for him to hold onto them, Shīno decided to take them to the police for safekeeping.

Just five more minutes. Although thinking of the twenty billion yen was a lot of pressure, Kazutaka told himself that it was all right since he was doing this for his friend.

Kazutaka thought it was just about time to have reached the destination when the car stopped. He waited for three minutes, but the car didn't start moving again. It was too long to be stopped for a light.

"Excuse me, are we there yet?" Kazutaka asked through the intercom. But there was no reply.

"Ah, hello? Are we at police headquarters?" he asked as the cargo door opened. "Oh, just as I thought. We're here, aren't we?" Kazutaka paused in shock.

The man who opened the door was not in a security company uniform. He was dressed all in black. Even his head was covered by a bag-like mask over his head. The only thing Kazutaka could see was the man's eyes. Two others were with the man, also clad completely in black. They quickly entered the cargo space.

Hey, wait a minute. Déjà vu, I've seen something like this before. Yeah, that's right. It was in a movie I saw the other day. Kazutaka barely had time to

complete that thought before he felt an acute pain in his eyes and heard a sharp swoosh.

“Whoa! What the...?”

His capacity to think clearly was gone in an instant. Kazutaka pressed his hands over his eyes but they were peeled off from his face by a strong force. The next thing Kazutaka knew, he was blindfolded and some kind of cloth was stuffed into his mouth. "Stop it! What are you doing to me?" Kazutaka tried to scream at his attackers but it came out as grunts. "Ugfh. Ahhh, hmm!"

As if to fill the void of his shattered thoughts, panic kicked in. Kazutaka had no idea what was going on. He didn’t know what was happening to him. He was utterly helpless. Someone held his legs and wrapped something around them so that he couldn’t move his legs. Next were his arms. Both arms were then tied together over his chest so that Kazutaka also lost control of them. Then he heard a big thud. He knew what that was. Then the attaché case was set on Kazutaka’s stomach. All of a sudden, it dawned on him. The jewelry was being stolen, with him attached.

Nooo! He screamed loudly within his own mind.

Kazutaka knew he wasn’t worth that much even if they did decide to try to sell him into slavery. But the attaché case, which was connected to him by handcuffs, contained twenty billion yen worth of jewelry. His panic peaked.

“Bring him out,” Kazutaka heard a man say. He was grasped under his armpits then felt his arms and legs being pulled. Kazutaka felt sharp, shooting pains as his joints protested being yanked out of their sockets. He then suddenly felt light headed along with a strange sense of floating. He felt as if the world had gone upside down. “Ughhh, hmm, ahhh!” *Stop! Let me go!* A series of loud muffled grunts were all that came out of his mouth as he tried to beg for them to cease his torment.

This was not something that should happen to a decent, upstanding, middle school teacher. Kazutaka wanted to fight back but he couldn’t move his arms or legs. Abruptly, his body was laid on something soft and cushiony. Kazutaka heard several footsteps and the sound of a few vehicle doors slamming shut. Then it felt as though his entire body was being pushed towards his legs. He decided

that the vehicle must have started moving. He knew he most likely had been moved into a different vehicle.

He thought of Shīno. What would he do when he got to the police station and found out that Kazutaka wasn't there? Shīno would look for him, but the police themselves would not move all that quickly. They would likely spend unbelievably long hours asking question after questions doing an interrogation before finally deciding, "It' a big hassle but we'd better do something about it. Citizens will complain otherwise." Kazutaka was certain of this from his previous experiences with local police when his middle schoolers caused trouble.

Shīno, please. Start looking for me right away. Your twenty billion yen is here. More importantly, I'm right here, Shīno, Kazutaka wanted to pray aloud, but being rendered incapable of speaking or moving in any way meant he was left to just thinking. He just hoped that his prayers would be heard anyway.

He felt his heart begin to race. His whole body felt hot and he could feel sweat begin to pour off of himself. Just as suddenly, Kazutaka felt something cool and soothing on his forehead and he heard a man speak into his ear.

"Don't worry. We won't harm you."

Huh? That voice sounded rather gentle and even a bit kind. No, these are my enemies!

"Ugh, humph!" This was no time to be admiring the tone of one of his attackers' voices. Frustrated, Kazutaka shook his head to escape from something cold pressing against his forehead. That something touched his forehead again. It was pressed upon Kazutaka's forehead softly in a way meant to calm him. That mystery object was probably a hand. The gentle voice whispered again.

"Once we take out what's inside the attaché case, we'll let you go. Please cooperate. You can't escape anyway. Understand?"

"Agh?" Kazutaka wanted to ask who it was. He stopped squirming, and then he felt his head being caressed. "Please be quiet. We'll drive like this for a little while."

"Ugh..."

"That's it. Good boy."

Hey, I'm not a dog. I'm 27 years old. What do you mean, "Good boy?" Kazutaka protested inwardly.

"The spray we used earlier, those were only eye drops. So your eyes will be fine. Did it smart a little? That's because we used a stinging type, but don't worry, it's totally harmless. Sorry if we alarmed you."

Oh yes. I was alarmed alright, Kazutaka admitted.

Kazutaka turned toward where the voice was coming from. He heard breathy chuckles.

"Look. He's listening to me. Maybe we can free his arms as long as he stays calm."

"No way, chief," another low voice spoke from a short distance away. Then Kazutaka heard someone approaching, followed by a clicking noise. It sounded like metal rubbing against metal.

The gentle voiced man whispered, "He's awfully young. Why did Shīno pick such a young clerk to transport such valuable goods?"

I'm not a clerk, Kazutaka wanted to tell them, but it was impossible.

"There will be a loud noise from metal being cut. Be patient, okay? Oh, also...don't move your head or arm. That would be dangerous." The owner of the gentle voice patted Kazutaka's arm soothingly as he whispered. Kazutaka then heard a rustling sound and something soft was spread over his body.

Ah ha. They were severing the metal chain, separating the handcuffs from the attaché case. They placed a blanket over him to prevent him getting hurt by flying metal bits and pieces.

These thieves are very thoughtful. Hum? Wait a minute, Kazutaka thought. *Why am I impressed by how thoughtful they are?*

Shortly after, someone held Kazutaka's arm down.

"Go for it."

Immediately, a loud noise started. Kazutaka felt vibrations on his wrist. They were trying to cut the handcuff chain. The noise continued for about 30 seconds and then abruptly stopped.

“This isn't working, looks like they used some kind of special metal.”

“Doesn’t work? Not even a bit?”

“No. Look here. You see? The chain barely has a scratch but the blade on our metal cutter is completely worn down. It’s gotta be a chrome alloy or something.”

“Can we cut into the attaché case then?”

“We might damage what’s inside.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Hmm. What should we do? We'd planned to just take the attaché case and release the clerk. Stealing isn’t such a big deal. We know how to get away with it, but if we take the clerk with us, that’s kidnapping,” the low voiced man responded.

“Well, we’ll just have to take him if we can’t cut the chain.”

“Todo-san, can’t you open the attaché case?”

“There’s no key hole.”

“No key hole? Um, right.”

If Kazutaka could have spoken he would have told them that it was because the attaché case had been locked by remote control. Ordinary keys wouldn’t open it. “Look here, chief. There are four sensors right where the case opens. There must be multiple locks inside the case controlled by a remote control.”

“Like the doors on cars?”

“That’s right. The first lock will align patterned indentations. The second one will send the bolt through. Then separate gears will fasten the bolt. Or something like that. It’s a multi-step lock.”

You’re a thief among thieves. You know everything I wanted to tell you. Kazutaka was impressed. *But Shīno has the remote control and he is probably at the police station by now. It’s very unlikely that he will show up here with the remote control in order to rescue me. If that’s the case, the team of thieves can’t simply take the jewelry and let me go. The chances of my release are*

looking very slim.

“Can we remove the handcuffs, Todo-san?”

“The handcuffs are also secured by a remote lock. There are circular parts edged on the round side outside of the cuffs. These are one of the latest models, recently developed in America.”

Yeah. These handcuffs are also a high tech item. Kazutaka found himself mentally chiming in.

"The handcuffs cannot be removed by human force,” Shīno had told Kazutaka when he put these on his wrist.

“Now we have a problem. What should we do?” The gentle voice, whom the other guys called chief, tapped on the attaché case gently with a sigh. Although he couldn’t see because of the blindfold, Kazutaka sensed a lot of pondering going on.

Kazutaka had wondered where they were taking him and what was going to happen to him when they got there. Those first worries were now gone, but another worry was sinking in.

Another man’s voice from far off rang out. It sounded mechanical, as if coming through a speaker. “Chief, a call from Ken. Kōhei Shīno has just gone inside police headquarters.”

“Now? He’s late. What has he been doing?”

“Beats me.”

“Hmm, there’s something fishy about him… Oh well. As planned, we’ll keep the transporter moving and release the driver outside the prefecture in an hour.”

“Roger that.”

After kidnapping Kazutaka with the attaché case, they must have carjacked the security company’s transporter with the driver still inside.

“Chief, we’ll be entering Tōmei Expressway in about five minutes.”

“Hold it. Todo-san, what’s the sensor response on the attaché case? If it’s got a tracking device built in, they’ll know our location.”

“Negative. No electric waves or signals are coming out of the case.”

“It’s such a high tech gadget, yet it doesn’t even have GPS? That’s odd. Well, let’s get onto the expressway.”

The engine revved and Kazutaka felt the car speeding up. The man they called chief as well as the other guys fell quiet. Kazutaka heard a beeping intermittently from some unknown source. Blindfolded, his sense of hearing seemed sharper, even the small sound of rustling clothes sounded incredibly clear.

“Chief, take a break until we get onto the Metropolitan Expressway. I’ll wake you up when we’re getting off Tōmei.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be okay. We never know when the boss will call. So I’ll stay awake just in case.” The chief’s laughter moved away.

“Do you really think this is going to be the boss’s last job?”

“This is the last one. We made him promise. Whatever the outcome of this one is, we’ll go our separate ways next Sunday. I’ll be in line at the employment agency looking for a job.”

They laughed cheerfully.

What? Why would they need to go to an employment agency and look for a job after stealing twenty billion yen worth of jewelry? Kazutaka had always thought that thieves like these guys would normally take the money, go abroad, and live like kings, just like in the movies.

These people are different, Kazutaka thought. *They're far too kind for a team of thieves. Their conversation seemed somewhat intellectual, too. The swift kidnapping and heist, they were not doing this impulsively and going with the flow. It must have been perfectly planned and flawlessly executed*.

Silence prevailed inside the car until a soft beeping eventually broke it. “Hi, Ren. Sorry to bug you so late. Yeah, it’s me. I hate to trouble you but we need your help. We have a problem with opening an attaché case. Yeah, with handcuffs attached to it. Both were locked by a remote control. We haven’t been able to unlock either of them yet. Can you come take a look?”

A gentle voice spoke, which meant chief must be on the phone. Kazutaka

listened to the chief's voice for a while. It sounded tender, as though he were whispering to a lover or something. Surely a thief's a thief no matter how gentle they may sound. A soft, kind voice doesn't excuse stealing.

"Yeah. Can you come? We're about to get on the expressway. No, we won't use a hotel room. We'll head for the pier and spend the night somewhere around there. I'll call you again once we're in Tokyo. On your cell? Okay. Talk to you later then."

Kazutaka heard a small beep and a voice saying, "Okay." Someone tapped Kazutaka on his chest lightly.

"We have an expert coming. So bear with us for just a few more hours."

Yes, I will, Kazutaka nodded to himself.

"Shall I loosen your suit and tie?" His shirt was unbuttoned a little, which gave him relief around his neck. The heat trapped inside the shirt evaporated and Kazutaka felt a little cooler. Kazutaka wanted him to loosen his arms and legs as well. He also thought the cloth inside his mouth felt kind of gross. *Oh, and it would be nice to get the blindfold off, too*. Kazutaka knew he was being hopeful, but it didn't happen.

His bound legs and arms were beginning to ache. Kazutaka felt the weight of the attaché case, which was half resting on his left elbow, getting heavier and heavier over time. He never knew lying down without moving could be such torture.

He wondered what was going to happen to him. They were after the jewelry inside the attaché case. If they succeeded in opening the case and obtaining the contents, Kazutaka might go free. Or if they succeeded in unlocking the handcuffs to separate him from the case, that'd be good, too.

Suddenly, Kazutaka saw a ray of hope. According to what chief had said, they would be meeting up with a guy who could possibly open the attaché case once they got to Tokyo. That guy must be a professional lock-picker. He felt great relief that it didn't look like he was going to get on the bus to heaven just yet. It would be best to remain cooperative without getting his captors agitated.

Once he relaxed, Kazutaka thought of the Cup-o-Noodles he had left at his

apartment. Then his stomach growled. Come to think of it, all he'd eaten today were some sandwiches in the morning. He hadn't eaten anything else all afternoon. Kazutaka began to feel hungry and dizzy. Being blindfolded, Kazutaka didn't really know if he was feeling dizzy and swaying or not. He might just be feeling the motion of a moving car. But Kazutaka knew he was definitely hungry.

Kazutaka thought of what he would have normally been doing. He would be writing this month's activity reports in his room, which needed to be distributed to the board of education and parents. Mika sometimes would call him in the middle of night. Her parents didn't get along well and Mika would call to say, "I'm scared of going home, Mr. Yui." He wondered if she was okay tonight. There was also Hitoshi-kun. He sometimes lost his self-control and had a tendency to stir up trouble on purpose. Kazutaka wondered how Hitoshi-kun was doing. And then there was Naomi. Her mother would sometimes call to say, "Naomi hasn't come home yet. It's very late, and I'm worried." Kazutaka began to worry about the children. He was being taken to a place they couldn't reach him. He began to feel more worried than afraid.

Here we go, Ren thought to himself as he picked up his car keys.

The call was from Yuri Fuwa. If he needed help, Ren would be there no matter what, no matter where. True, Yuri had dumped him in the past. True, Ren was still a lonely single man because he hadn't recovered from that shock, but none of that mattered now.

Ren more or less knew what Fuwa and the other members had been planning for a year now. Ren had made a high-speed revolution metal cutter for them about a month ago. If Ren was needed now, the ”something” Fuwa wanted must be inside an attaché case made of some kind of metal that the metal cutter couldn't cut. Neither the time nor the place was clear, but Ren guessed the overall picture. The place mentioned on the phone was just referred to as "a pier," but it must be a ferry pier at Tokyo Bay.

Handcuffs, attaché case, remote control lock...none of which the metal cutter could touch. That meant sensor parts, a charge-coupled device, an electromagnetic scanner, a personal computer, an infrared generator, and

batteries would be called for. Ren gathered the instruments and tools and tossed them into the car. He turned back to the Buddhist altar and apologized. Since Ren was about to take part in an illegal activity, he had to clasp his hands before the altar to tell his father in advance. His father in the picture was glaring at Ren with a stern look, but uttered no words of condemnation. “Sorry, Dad. Just one last time.” Ren locked the front door, got in the car, and turned on the ignition. The car carrying Fuwa and his team members must be moving north on the Tōmei Expressway. They would be at the ferry pier in a couple of hours. There had been only the one time that Ren had participated as a driver. They had used a ferry that time also. It was convenient to travel in an R.V. because they could leave the equipment and tools hidden inside. R.V.'s were also useful for hiding people as well as for providing a space for sleep. *Using a ferry to travel, to provide time for the team to rest, and time to adjust the plan is indeed a good idea*, Ren thought to himself. Fuwa and his boyfriend were protecting the health and public security of Japan along the waterfront. They pretended to be buyers of the nightmare white powder coming from abroad. They then discarded the goods. Sometimes, the deals were worth millions of yen. They needed funds to cover those costs. That’s where Fuwa came in. Ren was fuzzy on the details, but it seemed that in order to make the transaction payment the last time, they'd retrieved jewelry stolen from a museum in Southeast Asia. When the thieves brought the stolen goods to a jeweler in Japan, Fuwa had switched them with counterfeits. Then Bud West took over. He took the real jewelry somewhere in Europe and sold it for euros. The euros were then exchanged for the illicit powder somewhere off the Port of Yokohama. The white powder was dumped into the ocean off Izu Peninsula. The fish in the area may have gotten high, but it was better than having the dangerous drugs being used by people. It would have helped wreck lives and profited criminals. It was a dangerous job. But as long as there is a demand, the powder will keep coming from across the ocean. Sellers did not care how buyers would use the goods as long as they got their money. The authorities conducted investigations to capture the importers, but there was always somebody new. Bud thought it best to understand the route, buy it out, and discard it. There was something to be said for that.

Fuwa was very sharp, like a precision machine, and talented with top level skills that benefited a thief. He'd told Ren last year that these big jobs were getting to

be stressful at his age. Fuwa was only 35, just ten years older than Ren. Fuwa had always had a uniquely sophisticated manner even when he was much younger. He just looked classy somehow. Ren had been crazy about Fuwa at one point. Ren could still remember the day Fuwa came to his factory for the first time. Fuwa had wanted a special order. He'd truly been a notch above the pack. It had been love at first sight. Ren Atobe had been 16 years old then. After several orders, Fuwa noticed how Ren felt about him. They started to have a relationship beyond business. The sweet moments Fuwa shared with him as a couple were still shining milestones in Ren's mind. Even after their breakup, Ren had sincerely wished for Fuwa's happiness. Retiring from the front lines to earn living in a part time job would be safer and more peaceful. Hopefully, Bud would put an end to this risky business and follow Fuwa into retirement so that they could lead a quiet life. With those thoughts, Ren traveled east on the Metropolitan Expressway.

Kazutaka had not been a highly valued member of the teaching staff while teaching at the public middle school. Kazutaka had been harshly criticized with claims being made that he had compromised himself in order to appeal to the students. It had taken three years full of trial and error for him. Student reactions to his methods varied but his classes never got out of hand just because Kazutaka was deemed to have a soft touch. Some students even liked his laid-back personality, saying things like "Yui-sensei is spacey, which is very comforting."

The deterioration of public education had been a topic of public interest for quite some time, but at least the classes Kazutaka was in charge of had never became violent or chaotic. Kazutaka had thought a teacher like himself might be needed to provide an oasis of calm. That was why he'd applied for the "Nagomi Kyōshitsu" or "comforting classroom" program that was designed for school-phobic children. His predecessor was just finishing up a three year term at that time and his application had been approved. Since that April, the Nagomi Kyōshitsu held inside the City Library had been Kazutaka's job.

At this time of year, eighth graders requested career counseling. So Kazutaka often worked at home as well, even on weekends. There was a student whose

only middle school attendance had been during the entrance ceremony, yet the student wanted to go on to high school. Kazutaka had been preparing the necessary paperwork earlier in the afternoon when Shīno rang him.

"Yui, can you do me a favor? I've got some questionable goods. I want you to take them to the police for me."

Shīno had taken over his family's jewelry business after graduating from college. As young as he was, Shīno was owner and president of a jewelry store chain that had several branches. When Shīno needed to transport highly priced valuables from the main store to a branch or from one of the branches to a vault at the bank, Kazutaka often helped him guard the attaché case by riding along inside one of the security company's vehicles. Shīno sometimes also rode along, and still other times, some of his clerks would.

Shīno felt unable to trust any of his employees completely, but he placed complete faith in Kazutaka. Since he understood Shīno's worries, Kazutaka always cooperated, but this kidnapping felt utterly unexpected.

Kazutaka wondered where they were taking him. They'd said that they wouldn't harm him but they were thieves after all. Just how far could he trust them? After traveling quite some time, Kazutaka felt the car turn off of the expressway. He couldn't hear anything from the outside. The only hints he had he gained from their conversation. Kazutaka listened intently but they hardly spoke. Kazutaka had no idea how many of them were there or where they were heading. He heard words like "pier," "Tokyo," "not using hotel," "call later," and "expert is coming." He had no choice other than to believe those words. Kazutaka remained submissive to their demands.

Shortly after that, Kazutaka heard the chief calling someone. The car kept moving for several more minutes until it eventually came to a stop. The engine was killed.

"We may be spending the night here. Toshi-kun, can you get us some bento?"

A voice, sounding as if it came through the speaker, replied, "Okay." Kazutaka heard the sounds of people entering and exiting the vehicle.

The chief's voice said, "He's calm, very cooperative."

Several footsteps approached Kazutaka. A low voice suddenly spoke from right next to Kazutaka.

“Should we take off the blindfold and gag, Yuri?”

“You’re probably right. It’s not like he can run away or anything. Go ahead and take them off, Ren.”

Someone bent down next to Kazutaka. Something touched his face. Shortly after, a flood of bright light shone into his eyes. Because he had been blindfolded for so long, his eyes had become accustomed to being in the darkness. Kazutaka found himself having to close his eyes tightly in order to look away from the sudden bright light. It felt too bright to open his eyes. A manly voice spoke, sounding surprised. “Is he just a kid?”

“A kid wouldn’t transport jewelry, Ren.”

“But he is rather...”

He didn’t actually say the word childlike, but Kazutaka knew that’s what the man was thinking.

“Let me tell you something.” Although his arms and legs were not free yet, and he couldn’t open his eyes in the sudden light, Kazutaka attempted to protest as much as he could.

“I’m not some kid, but an adult, a contributing member of society. Look up Nagomi Kyōshitsu under the Minamihama City Board of Education in a phone book. Call them and ask for Kazutaka Yui, adaptation class counselor. They’ll know who I am.”

The chief’s kind voice asked, “Counselor? If you report to the Board of Education, you’re not a senior volunteer, are you?”

“Not a senior volunteer. I run a publicly funded class for school-phobic children. My official title is middle school teacher.”

“Why is a school teacher working at Shīno’s store?”

“I’m not his employee. I was just asked to take care of this transport.”

There was an awkward silence. Kazutaka slowly opened his eyes and saw two of them. One was small and slender. He wore a black top and a matching pair of

trousers and was looking down at Kazutaka. The other one was in a white, short sleeved T-shirt despite the cold weather. Behind them both stood a heavily-bearded man. *That must be "Todo-san*." Kazutaka thought.

There was another young and skinny man with brown hair. Kazutaka assumed that was "Toshi-kun."

"Which is easier, Ren? Opening the case? Or removing the handcuffs?"

The man in black seemed to be the one who'd been beside Kazutaka the entire time, the chief with a gentle voice. The chief was now talking to the T-shirt guy in a whisper. Kazutaka decided that the T-shirt man must be the lock-picking expert.

Although the blindfold and gag had been removed, his arms and legs remained tied up. Since he couldn't get up, there was no way Kazutaka could intimidate these thieves by glaring or actively protesting. Knowing it would be bad to irritate them so much that they would say, "He's become a nuisance. Let's just get rid of him," Kazutaka took a deep breath and became quiet.

The man, whom they called Ren, bent down to check out the attaché case. In a matter of less than three minutes, he got up.

"It'll take quite a while. The remote control uses infrared. It'll take me about five hours to figure out the frequency for each of the locks. Over 20 hours total."

"What about the handcuffs?"

"These handcuffs are state of the art, recently developed in the States. The remote control for them has a fingerprint sensor. Only authorized persons can open them."

The chief crossed his arms upon hearing this news.

"We're getting on a ferry at five o'clock. Do you think you can make it in time?"

"That'll give me 17 hours. I might be able to break three of them at the most by then. I can tackle the last one after getting on the ferry."

"I don't wanna drag this poor man onto the ferry."

They were making Kazutaka's life miserable. If they truly had pity on him, they would turn around and take him back. But Kazutaka knew that he shouldn't risk

pushing any of their buttons. This was no time to be defiant.

“Let’s get started now.”

“We’re counting on you, Ren. Can you untie him, Todo-san?”

“Are you sure about that, chief?” the macho looking man, the one they called Todo-san, asked in his very deep voice as he frowned.

“It’ll be all right. He says he’s a school teacher. Let’s hear his story as we work. I’d like to know why he was helping Shīno. His stomach was growling earlier, too. He needs to eat something. Give him one of those bentos you got from the convenience store, Toshi-kun.”

The young one said, "Okay," then moved away. Quickly returning, there was a rustling sound as he removed a bento from a shopping bag.

Without softening his stern look, the man called Todo-san untied the rope, which was tethering his arms and wrists together, then freed his legs. Todo-san supported Kazutaka’s back to help him sit up. Only the handcuffs and the attaché case were still intact. For a split second, Kazutaka toyed with the idea of knocking everyone down and running away. The group consisted of the chief, Todo-san, Ren, and Toshi-kun. Four people, eight fists. Kazutaka had one attached to the attaché case, leaving only one hand free. Kazutaka knew there was no chance he could get away.

Todo-san and Toshi-kun each grabbed one of Kazutaka’s arms and helped him up. When Kazutaka looked around from his new standing position, he saw that there was a long sofa that could double as a bed. There was also a table with folding legs that appeared to serve for both dining and as a work area. A few folding chairs were placed around it. It was only the inside of an R.V., but it looked quite comfortable. Instruments and tools were neatly organized on shelves and a net was covering the shelves to prevent items from falling.

Since Kazutaka still had his left hand connected to the attaché case, they were kind to him. The chief himself opened a bottled drink and placed it in front of him. He also removed the wrapping from the bento and took out the disposable chopsticks. Kazutaka had spent the last five years as a teacher and no one had ever taken care of him like this. He felt a bit impressed. It was a deluxe meal with many side dishes for which Kazutaka felt thankful for.

When Kazutaka picked up the chopsticks to eat, Ren shot him a sharp look from the side. “You should say thanks for your meal first.”

Being a teacher, he found it irritating to have a thief try to teach him manners. Kazutaka managed to remember that he should be obedient in this situation. He was starving.

“I’m grateful for this meal that I am about to have.” Having said this in a perfunctory manner, Kazutaka was about to dig in. Just then, the bento disappeared from his sight. Ren had snatched it away from Kazutaka.

“That was not sincere. It didn’t sound like you meant it. Try again.”

“Uhm.” Kazutaka hadn’t expected to hear “That was not sincere” from a thief. Kazutaka put down the chopsticks and stared at Ren. Kazutaka thought about the unreasonable situation he had been forced into. He tried to muster what little bit of fighting spirit he had left. Whom should he sincerely thank for the meal in a situation like this? Surely if they cared about what’s proper, they wouldn’t be stealing jewelry. Kazutaka’s anger subsided as he looked at Ren. Even with thieves, thanking insincerely was not proper behavior. He remembered that once a student had told him, "Since it was Mr. Yui’s class, I thought it’d be okay to take a nap." That had felt awful. Kazutaka realized he should not use the same logic. After all, even if thieves had bought it, the meal had been prepared by someone else. Kazutaka had no intention of thanking the thieves, but he should nevertheless offer up thanks to the people who had prepared it and to nature, which had provided ingredients.

“I’m grateful for the meal I am about to have,” Kazutaka said with great sincerity, head bowed.

“Here you go.”

The bento reappeared.

“You haven’t changed, Ren.” The chief smiled from where he stood observing them nearby. Kazutaka figured that Ren must be quite a disciplinarian about manners. They were definitely a weird team of thieves. Kazutaka looked around with new insight. The chief had a gentle voice and an elegant manner. Todo-san seemed like a bouncer. Toshi-kun seemed to be very agile and Ren appeared to be very organized and rigid. They didn’t look rough or violent like most rogues.

Rather, they looked clean, sophisticated, and undoubtedly intelligent. Kazutaka wondered how people like these came to be stealing things. Kazutaka knew he should mind his own business. After all, thieves were thieves, right?

“All right, let’s have Ren get on with it. In the meantime, can I ask you a few questions?” The chief sat down diagonally to the left in front of Kazutaka. A voice recorder was set on top of the table.

“You told us before, but can you repeat your name, workplace, and address?”

“May I ask you why you want to know that?”

“We’d like to do periodical follow ups on you. Just to make sure you are safe and sound.”

Surprised, Kazutaka swallowed a chunk of broiled salmon. He rolled his eyes, choking.

“Something stuck in your throat? Are you all right?” The chief stroked Kazutaka’s back gently.

“What do you mean if I’m safe and sound?”

“We’ve caused you a lot of trouble. So we’d like to make up for it.”

“But you are thieves, aren’t you? Don’t you know the saying that there's no honor amongst thieves?”

Ren, who was sitting on Kazutaka's left, slammed his hand on the table. Kazutaka winced and Ren looked at him sharply.

“Not all thieves are ruffians. Some of us are regular guys just like you when you are not teaching. Remember that.”

“I admit that I am only an ordinary man, but I definitely don’t approve of stealing or restraining someone against their will. If you think you can justify your actions, then tell me the reason why you think this is justified.”

Someone softly tapped Kazutaka’s arm. It was the chief and he was smiling kindly. “Let me explain step by step. Yui-san, was it? I’m Fuwa. Yuri Fuwa. And that’s my real name.”

Kazutaka tilted his head. This was weird. Thieves did not normally reveal their

true identities. It didn’t sound like the chief was giving him a fake name though. Not only Chief Fuwa, but also Todo-san, Toshi-kun, and Ren didn’t look like people who’d steal or deceive other people.

“Other than myself, I can only tell you their nicknames. This here is Todo-san. That young one is Toshi-kun. And sitting next to you is Ren.”

“Ren is my real name,” Ren interrupted. Chief Fuwa gave a wry grin. Kazutaka turned to look at Ren who gazed steadily back at him. Ren had sharp eyes that showed a strong will. He gazed at Kazutaka for quite a long time. It was unsettling. In Kazutaka's experience, people normally didn’t stare at others for no reason. Two men would usually look straight into each other’s eyes for no more than five seconds. If the stare lasted longer, it was usually seen as a declaration of hostility.

“Is this your first time seeing a teacher in person or something? Why are you staring at me like that?” His question didn’t break Ren’s stare. Kazutaka thought Ren was rather strange. Then Kazutaka felt someone tapping his arm gently again.

“Yui-san, please know that Ren, Todo-san, and Toshi-kun are not thieves. I’m the only thief around. They are just helping me as technical support. They have nothing to do with any actual stealing. So don’t be mad at them, just be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry.”

“Really?” Fuwa gave a broad smile. Strangely, that smile reminded Kazutaka of an angel. Kazutaka wondered why he was comparing Yuri to an angel when he was obviously a downright thief. Then someone cleared their throat deliberately and Kazutaka came back to reality. He looked to his left to find Ren glaring at him with a frown. Why was he glaring at Kazutaka? They were the ones who had created this situation. Kazutaka felt frustrated. He didn’t think a thief had any right to glare at him and if Fuwa was a gentleman, then why was Ren so hostile?

While Kazutaka was looking back at Ren, however, he realized something else. Ren’s eyes were clear with a purity of soul. Because of his occupation, Kazutaka got to meet all kinds of people. Children, their parents or guardians, co-workers, you name it, he’d met a lot of people in the last five years. There had been some

rough people among them. The moment Kazutaka laid eyes on some of the parents or guardians he'd met, he knew they could be dangerous. Some of them simply had tough lives; others appeared to have personality disorders. Facial expressions at times revealed more than words ever could.

Ren’s look didn’t show any stain of evil. His facial expression only looked tough because he was glaring at Kazutaka. It wasn't the look of someone involved in criminal activity. Ren seemed to be too pure for that. Not only did Ren’s eyes look pure, but his set mouth showed an extremely strong will, and his cheeks and chin indicated diligence. Overall, Ren’s face was that of an honest laborer. For a few moments, Ren and Kazutaka stared at each other before Ren spoke at last. “Can I get started while you are talking, Yuri? I don’t want to waste time.”

Ren broke the eye contact.

“Yeah, good idea, Ren. Should we get you some food, too? Toshi-kun can make another run for it.”

“No thanks, I’ve already eaten.”

“Just a Cup-o-Noodles again, right?”

Ren pressed his lips into a thin line. He looked like a child being chastised. It made Ren look rather cute and Kazutaka couldn’t help smiling. Ren shot him another sharp look.

“Don’t grin for no reason.”

“Um, sorry.”

“These may not be your possessions. But you shouldn’t smile when someone's property is being stolen.”

Fuwa was elegant and gracious. Ren, on the other hand, was somewhat argumentative, though Kazutaka didn’t feel offended in the slightest. It was obvious that Ren didn't feel any remorse over Kazutaka's situation. Ren's lock-picking skills must be of a very high level seeing as how the group had called him in. And although Ren did have an attitude problem, Kazutaka had a personal rule about not becoming confrontational when dealing with others. Since Kazutaka always had to guess what adolescents were really trying to say, it helped to have made it his habit to think before getting angry.

The chief tapped on Kazutaka's arm. "Excuse me. Can I ask you something? A remote control was used to lock this attaché case, right? Can you tell me what it was like?"

"Oh, that. It had numbers on it. Looked sort of like a calculator, or a TV remote. Some of the numbers were pushed to send a signal or something."

"Just as I thought."

"And the key to the handcuffs is inside the attaché case. It's a sensor key that reads fingerprints so it can't be opened unless Shīno is here."

As he'd put the key to the handcuffs into the attaché case and closed the lid, Shīno had been reading the instructions for operating the remote control. With those instructions and the remote control, the attaché case could be opened in a few seconds, but the thieves didn't have either of them.

Kneeling down on the floor, Ren examined the attaché case. He'd said that it'd take him several hours to unlock one. That meant it would take Ren twenty hours to open all four of them. Kazutaka wondered if he would work on it all night long without sleeping since Kazutaka wanted to be released as soon as possible. Ren looked up as if reading his mind.

"It takes about five hours to open one lock, Yuri. Once I get started, I don't want him or the attaché case to move much. No bathroom breaks, either. If he needs to go, we should let him go now."

"What? Do you mean to say that I'll have to be completely still for the whole five hours?" Kazutaka asked and Ren nodded briskly in reply.

"I'll read the accrual pulse and frequency of the infrared while sending 300 waves per second of electric signals from this generator. If there's a hit, we'll get a visual on the CCD screen. If we pause in the middle, we have to start all over again. So go to the bathroom now if you want."

"Got it. But how can I go to the bathroom like this?"

Kazutaka's left arm was chained to the attaché case with handcuffs and the chain was really short. He would not be able to carry the attaché case with his handcuffed left hand. He could hold the case along its bottom with his free right hand while supporting the top of case with his left hand. But if Kazutaka was

using both hands to hold the case, how would he manage to unzip his pants?

“I’ll stand next to you and hold the case while you conduct your business.”

“I don’t like that idea.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers, you know. It’s the only way.”

Ren’s commanding tone irritated Kazutaka.

“You can’t order me around. You are just a thief.”

“Weren’t you listening to what Yuri told you? I’m not a thief. I’m the manager of a small factory. Also, Yuri isn’t a low life thief like you might think. You sound like you despise thieves. But there are all kinds of thieves. Remember that.”

“You may be right. But no matter what the motives may be, stealing is not something to be admired. You may respect Fuwa-san, but I don’t have to feel the same way. I have no reason to.”

“Everything is black or white to you, huh? Suit yourself then.”

“Yeah, I will. I don’t need your permission.”

“What about the bathroom? Do you wanna go or not?”

“I’m still eating.”

Kazutaka was frustrated. He thought about eating slowly to irritate Ren and the others. Unfortunately, that would only delay his own release. Kazutaka decided to finish up his meal quickly.

“Thank you for the great meal.”

This time, Kazutaka offered his thanks politely with his head down. The fussy lock-picker remained silent. Ren didn’t scold Kazutaka this time.

Once outside the R.V., the public restroom was about 20 yards away. Ren and Todo-san accompanied Kazutaka. Odo-san stood watch outside the restroom. Ren came along into the restroom with Kazutaka and stood right next to him. It made Kazutaka feel extremely uncomfortable.

Ren held the attaché case while Kazutaka struggled to open the zipper with only his right hand.

“Do you need help with that?” Ren asked with a serious expression.

“No thank you,” Kazutaka answered soberly. Shīno had asked Kazutaka to wear a suit for the job tonight. Kazutaka wasn’t used to wearing this sort of attire. While taking his time in trying to find and carefully undo his fastenings, he glanced to the side to discover Ren looking straight at his groin.

“Can you not look?”

“We're both guys. Don’t worry about it.”

“That’s not the point.”

“If you're ashamed of it, I’ll try not to look. What am I saying? It’s not that I want to see it, I just want you to hurry up.”

“You’re rushing me.”

“Stop messing around and get on it, middle schooler.”

“I’m not a middle schooler. I’m a middle school teacher.”

Ren suddenly stretched his arm toward Kazutaka’s groin. The fly opened as Ren pulled down the zip. Ren’s hand quickly slipped through the opening.

“Yikes!” Kazutaka doubled over and squatted down.

“Shh. What are you screaming about? People will get the wrong idea!” Ren shouted back. His hand was trapped, tucked between Kazutaka’s thigh and stomach.

“Stop it. Don’t touch me. Get your hand off of me. Hey!”

“I’m not trying to touch you there. We just don’t have much time. We need to hurry!”

“Get your hand away!”

“If you want me to take my hand away, stand up! Get up and be done with it!”

The commotion in the restroom must have worried the others outside. Todo-san came in to check on them.

“What’s going on in there?”

Kazutaka was in a semi-crouching position and Ren’s hand was still at

Kazutaka’s groin. Todo-san looked at the pair, unsure of what to make of the scene before him. Todo-san simply shook his head and looked away. He sighed and left without saying another word.

Ren started work on the task of opening the attaché case.

Ren gave the on screen readouts his undivided attention while Kazutaka lay on a cot inside the car. The attaché case sat on a table beside Kazutaka. Electric currents were sent towards a sensor at the aperture area. When the frequency of both the sensor and scanner matched, a light would appear on the screen. A blink could mean missing this indication, so the device would also beep with a hit so that they didn't have to rely only on visual judgment.

"You said you could open one in five hours, right?" the hostage asked skeptically, but Ren didn't answer. Engaging in talk and missing a signal could cause an unnecessary delay.

"Excuse me, but what was I transporting anyway?" Kazutaka wanted to know as he didn't even know what in particular he was carrying. Fuwa reached over from where he sat nearby in a chair. He held out a page from a magazine so that Kazutaka could read it. It was an article on some jewelry which had been exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum and become a popular topic of conversation. Ren actually didn't know what the contents of the attaché case were, either.

"Whoa, that's all in English. Sorry, but I can't read that," Kazutaka said, ducking his head timidly.

Kazutaka didn't look dignified or reliable, especially being the school teacher that he was. Shameless yet brash—Ren worried about the educational system that was supposed to develop the young people, the bearers of Japan's future.

Fuwa started to read the magazine article for him. "This treasure was discovered inside a pyramid about 150 years ago by a British explorer. Many other trinkets and other valuable articles were discovered with this. They are normally housed in a vault at the British Museum but...this article came out for a special exhibit overseas."

Fuwa's voice always sounded nice and Ren was listening keenly to his voice. Ren worked all year without decent weekends or holidays off in order to keep the factory going. Always working, Ren didn't have much peace and quiet in his life. If only Fuwa were next to him when he woke up in the morning. If the first thing he heard was, "Oh, you are awake," in this soft voice, how happy would that

make Ren feel? Starting the day like that would make the day's work ten times easier. Ren would be enthused and he would no doubt go about energetically operating the machines, refining an IC chip cleaner, miniaturizing a medical camera, or handling the rapid processes of the spectral photometer.

But Ren could never admit to such romantic things out loud. He knew the way Fuwa engaged in romantic relationships. Fuwa could only be completely dedicated to one person with all his soul. One single person only, that's the kind of man Yuri Fuwa was. Currently, Fuwa was fully committed to Bud West, almost as if his life depended on it. Bud's official career was supposedly that of a sculptor. His grandfather was a famous Greek shipping merchant. His mother was an Australian actress and his father was a trading merchant. Despite coming from such an illustrious background, Bud was actually just a notorious prodigal son who just called himself a sculptor.

He had been virtually disowned by his well-heeled family now. Bud dressed like a homeless guy from under a bridge or something. He appeared very suspicious and shady. It was unknown how many zeroes his estimated fortune had, but nobody would ever imagine Bud to be a scion of wealth. Haves normally weren't greedy. Maybe that was why despite having had such a privileged upbringing, Bud seemed to actually enjoy living in strained circumstances. When in Japan, Bud usually rented an eighty square foot room and taught at an English Conversation school near the train station. Speaking Japanese with a weird accent, Bud was loved by everyone around him. Once a year or so, Bud would efficiently execute an operation of white powder disposal. Bud performed this task as though he were enjoying a mere hobby.

Ren was thinking about how much he wished this would be truly the last time they'd have to do such a task. Ren stole a glance at Fuwa sitting beside him. Wearing half a smile, Fuwa was still reading the magazine article, translating it into Japanese for Kazutaka who was listening contentedly. Fuwa would definitely win Kazutaka over by the time the hostage was released since Kazutaka looked simple-minded. Ren was convinced that Kazutaka would soon start seeing a halo over Fuwa's head.

"So, the jewelry probably came from Africa originally. From the neck down to the chest, chains are woven like a net where a total of 238 tanzanites are

embedded.”

“And that’s worth twenty billion yen?”

“That’s an estimated insurance value. But when it’s stolen and sold on the black market, the price could be only a third of that.”

"That’s still about seven billion yen," Kazutaka said in awe.

Kazutaka did not look like a middle school teacher at all. To picture him sitting in a classroom at a student desk was easier than picturing him teaching in front of a class. With such a baby face, the students most likely disrespected him, Ren thought.

“Tanzanites are a lot like diamonds except they are a deep blue.”

“Are there blue diamonds?”

“Yes. The piece inside this attaché case has a faceted tanzanite called “Teardrop of the Nile” in the middle. It's about 350 carats.”

“I’m not familiar with that jewelry unit. How big is one carat?”

It was easy to see that Kazutaka had never given a ring with a small gemstone to a girl before.

“Let’s see. I’d say five carats is like one gram. You’ve seen an engagement ring with a little diamond, haven’t you?”

“Only in commercials. How many carats is one of those?”

“About three tenth of a carat.”

“How heavy is the Teardrop of the Nile then?”

“Kazutaka, were you listening to Yuri? He just told you five carats equals to one gram, right? You divide 350 by 5. That’s 70 grams,” Ren snapped. Kazutaka stopped smiling and stared at Ren balefully. “Why are you being so mean?”

“It’s not a matter of being mean or kind. Just use your brain.”

Kazutaka turned away from Ren.

“Fuwa-san, is a gemstone of 350 carats hard to come by?”

Kazutaka had clearly decided to ignore Ren.

“You should tell your fellow female teachers when you get back, Kazutaka-san, that you’ve seen a 350-carat gem. Nobody will believe you,” Fuwa said softly and put a straw into Kazutaka’s mouth. Fuwa was giving him a sports drink.

Fuwa is treating Kazutaka like a prince, Ren thought discontentedly.

“Historically, it is very rare for us to see a huge stone anywhere close to 1,000 carats. In fact, there aren’t many that go over 100 carats. There are probably fewer than 30 in the world.”

“I shouldn’t be carrying such a rare item, then.”

“When the case is opened, maybe you can try it on?”

“Ah, no, no way. It wouldn’t look good on me anyway.”

This teacher guy is very strange. We're talking about an ornament that royalty in ancient Africa wore. It’s only natural that it wouldn’t look good on a modern Japanese person. It’s not a matter of looking good or not. It has to be worn by a person with the proper dignity and grace, Ren thought.

Ren was bewildered by Kazutaka, but at the same time, Ren noticed Kazutaka’s intrinsic and unique sensibility. Kazutaka never raised his voice, got too emotional, or hissed accusingly at Fuwa’s team in anger. Kazutaka remained unfailingly calm and spoke politely. When Kazutaka talked to Fuwa, he appeared to think before speaking so that he could choose the appropriate words.

Maybe it was because Kazutaka was a school teacher, but when he smiled as he spoke or nodded to others, he had a distinct kindness in his eyes. Kazutaka always listened very carefully, looking up at the speaker a little bit. He invariably acknowledged others by nodding in response and it didn’t look like it was calculated. It just came natural for Kazutaka, perhaps because he had an accepting personality.

Although this was beside the point, Kazutaka also looked rather young. He looked like a small child listening to others intently. Ren thought Kazutaka was cute, though it might be rude to say so. After all, he was a school teacher. Yet it was also undeniable that Kazutaka had a look in his gaze that made others want to talk to him.

Ren knew that he looked intimidating to other people. Ren took after his

father, so looking scary was hereditary. There was nothing he could do about it and he figured it didn't matter since how he looked didn’t affect how he did his work, so Ren never felt any jealousy over other people’s looks. He just honestly enjoyed looking at Kazutaka's diminutive features. However, Ren wasn’t daft enough to be nice to someone just because they were cute. Kazutaka not being able to instantly divide 350 by five worried Ren, he felt that he couldn’t trust the education of children to a middle school teacher like Kazutaka. Pondering this, Ren kept working.

A voice suddenly came through the R.V.'s speaker. It was Toshi, the driver.

“Chief, our boss is here.”

Tōdō quickly got up to open the back door. Fuwa became restless and fidgety beside Ren.

Fuwa always acts like this, Ren thought. *Fuwa becomes like an innocent and naive girl in the presence of someone she’s in love with*.

The door opened and Bud West came inside, his long body half bent. Bud was extremely tall, Ren noticed bitterly.

Bud started saying something in English. Ren’s English comprehension was pretty weak. He also needed to keep his focus on the screen now so he tried not to listen. Fuwa answered in English and Bud put his knee down next to Ren to pat him on his shoulder encouragingly. Bud was being overly friendly, but he was acting personably with grace and authority, which got on Ren’s nerves. Ren was keenly aware of his own twisted personality.

“Bud says thank you, Ren,” Fuwa translated and Ren nodded in silence. Ren didn’t want to look at Bud’s face. Bud squatted down next to the cot and said something to Kazutaka. Kazutaka simply rolled his eyes, looking dumbfounded. He couldn’t understand a thing Bud was saying.

“You can’t, Bud,” Fuwa grabbed Bud’s arm gently and pulled him back.

“What is Bud saying, Yuri?”

“He’s saying that he can sell Kazutaka-san for a better price than the jewelry.”

“Please limit the deal to the contents of the case. I don’t want to have

anything to do with human trafficking.”

“Oh, he’s just joking, Ren.” Despite Fuwa's reassurances, Kazutaka must have heard a semi-serious tone from when Bud had spoken as he'd lost his smile. Fuwa had spent a lot of time trying hard not to cause Kazutaka any fear, then Bud walked in and had given him something to worry about. What was so fun about disturbing a hostage’s mind? Look. Now Kazutaka had a stone cold expression. Ren wanted to remonstrate with Bud as his father would have. Unless you know the right time, place and audience, jokes either don’t work or they can be very offensive. But perhaps he shouldn’t be prejudiced against non-Japanese people. Ren didn’t think he could express himself well in English either, so Ren held his tongue.

“Kazutaka-sensei can’t move until I’ve finished my job here. And I need to concentrate on the scanning, Yuri, so I don’t need any distractions. Tell Bud that he can joke around outside,” Ren said without taking his eyes off of the screen Fuwa smiled.

Although Bud didn’t speak Japanese, he seemed to understand. Bud nodded with an earnest look, looking directly into Ren’s eyes. He then looked at the equipment with a smile, touched the attaché case softly, and finally stroked Fuwa’s shoulder down to the arm before getting out.

Bud’s series of actions could be translated into Japanese as "Ren, I didn’t mean to interfere with your work. I was just kidding about this boy being so cute. I just wanted to tease him a little. Opening the attaché case is the top priority now, of course. We’re counting on you, Ren. I’m stepping outside so I won’t bother you. Come, Yuri, my sweetheart."

Something like that, anyway. Bud spoke with his eyes more than with his mouth. You didn’t have to understand English to get the meaning of his looks. Bud left the vehicle and Yuri followed shortly after. Just then, there was a beep from the screen, indicating a hit on an infrared wavelength.

“That was a hit, 820 nanometers. This is going well.” Ren reset the wavelength and pressed a switch on the transmitter. There was a small sound of metal moving inside the attaché case. Kazutaka on the cot looked happy, too.

Huh? How about that? Ren thought that Kazutaka was acting like a teacher

now. He looked as if he were smiling at a child whose efforts had finally been rewarded with success. The childlike face was still there, but Kazutaka had a very pleasant smile. Ren understood that his teacher's smile must be very encouraging.

“That was quick, Ren.”

“I thought it’d take five hours, but one lock is already done. Let’s move onto the next one.”

“Can I turn over?”

“No. Don’t move.”

“All right.” Kazutaka pouted at being denied but obeyed Ren.

Ren thought Kazutaka now looked more like an obedient child than a teacher. Not being able to move, just having to lie there must surely be mind numbingly boring for Kazutaka. It wasn’t like Kazutaka would get anything out of this, but he was being a good sport over it all. Being cooperative is a good thing. Some machines seemed to have minds of their own and those often proved hard to handle. Subtle differences in tuning make for big differences in the finished product, Ren had learned this the hard way.

Ren liked straightforward machines. Not only machines, Ren liked simple, straightforward, and easy-to-understand people. Ren could not handle complicated and bizarre love relationships. Ren thought it would be ideal if he could say, "I love you," and his partner would be able to respond with "I love you, too" using exactly the same level of emotion.

Catching himself mid-thought, Ren paused and cocked his head. *Why am I thinking about my preference in love relationships when I am supposed to be tackling the attaché case? Focus, Ren. Don’t get distracted*, he scolded himself. *Machines won’t function the way you need them to if you let yourself get distracted*.

Ren needed to open the attaché case as soon as possible so that Kazutaka could go home. Kazutaka didn’t even work at a jeweler, for heaven's sake. He had simply decided to cooperate when asked to take these valuables to the police station because he was kind and good natured. Ren had known him only a

few hours, but he could tell how loyal and honest Kazutaka was.

A group of thieves must have appeared scary to Kazutaka, yet he remained polite, respectful, and fair towards them. People didn't learn such accepting attitudes overnight. It could only be personality traits that Kazutaka had established over many years. Ren didn't want to keep Kazutaka in custody for too many more hours, causing him more emotional pain.

"I'm onto the next one. If all goes smoothly, I'll be able to open the case by this evening and let you go before we board the ferry. So bear with me."

"Okay."

Ren turned on a switch and stared at the screen. It had taken Ren less than three hours to unlock the first lock. Ren adjusted the pulse's speed, hoping that the rest of locks would be on a shorter wavelength as well. With a few short mechanical sounds, the equipment started to do its job.

It was four o'clock in the morning when Ken-kun, their lookout, informed the group that Shīno was acting strangely.

"There's no sign of the police working on a search. That's weird," Chief Fuwa said, crossing his arms.

Kazutaka wondered if this meant that Shīno hadn't bothered reporting him as a missing person.

"Shīno left for the police station shortly after I did, didn't he?"

"Yeah. He did go to the police station but Shīno came out in less than ten minutes and went home. The driver from the security company was released a short time ago. He went straight home, too. It doesn't look like anybody notified the authorities of anything awry."

That sounded strange to Kazutaka, too.

Jewelry worth twenty billion yen stolen and Kazutaka kidnapped, but the driver didn't notify anybody? He should have run to the police station to explain that the robbery had taken place, Kazutaka thought.

Judging from how things were going, Kazutaka wasn't going to be released by tomorrow morning. That meant he wouldn't be going to work.

There were 15 students and two teachers at Nagomi Kyōshitsu. Tiny organization though it was, Kazutaka still could not be absent without notice and Kazutaka would be unable to prove that his reason for missing work was legitimate unless Shīno filed a police report.

Chief Fuwa contemplated the situation for a while and then called Ken-kun back. After talking on the phone for a few minutes, Fuwa shook his head and sighed.

“Maybe the stuff we have is fake.”

“Fake? What’s the deal with this elaborate attaché case then?”

“While we’re wasting our time struggling to open this case, Shīno can disappear with the genuine jewelry. You may have been used as a decoy.”

“Shīno wouldn’t do that to me. He’s my friend.”

“Sorry to have to break the news to you, Kazutaka-san, but Shīno has often fenced stolen jewels.”

“What?!”

“Let’s just open the attaché and check out the contents. Even if they are fakes, we’ll send you home safely. You can find out what Shīno’s true intentions were afterward.”

“Fuwa-san, you don’t trust Shīno, do you?”

“No, I don’t, but Shīno is the only one who can remove the handcuffs. So you should go see Shīno when you get back, Kazutaka-san.”

It appeared that Fuwa kept a watch on Shīno. Kazutaka didn’t know whom to trust. Shīno or Fuwa? Looking back, it was strange that Shīno had entrusted twenty billion yen of goods to Kazutaka alone. Shīno hadn't ridden along in the transport car, either.

“Traveling with key and attaché case together doesn’t make sense, Yui.” That was the reason he'd given for driving his own car to the police station.

Shīno had left Shīno Jewelry about the same time Kazutaka did. But Shīno entered the police station five minutes before this R.V. had gotten onto the Tōmei Expressway. Since he had been blindfolded and unable to check his

phone, Kazutaka didn't know the exact time that had occurred. Even so, he realized that there was an unusual gap in the timing of the sequence of events.

Kazutaka couldn't ferret out the truth since Shīno wasn't here to question. All he could do was hope that Ren was able to finish his job swiftly. That way, once they checked the contents of the attaché case, Kazutaka could walk free.

At six o'clock in the morning, Ren opened the second lock successfully. "You said it'd take five hours for each one, but you've already done two. That was fast."

"I'm doing this for my team."

Ren hadn't said he was doing it for Kazutaka. Perhaps he was merely being honest, but Kazutaka felt slightly hurt anyway.

"Oh really? I thought you were trying really hard to impress Fuwa-san, Ren."

A hard fist immediately cuffed Kazutaka's head. The impact of the knuckle hitting Kazutaka's skull made a low thump but surprisingly, he didn't feel much pain. Kazutaka assumed that Ren had pulled his punch. He had earlier suspected that Ren was attracted to Fuwa and that was why he worked so intently. Kazutaka now knew he might be correct in his assumption.

Come to think of it, Ren hadn't slept all night. He's been working on unlocking the case the whole time. Ren never said anything unless it was necessary. He wasn't one for idle chitchat. Kazutaka had, however, sensed Ren's tension whenever Fuwa came near.

Because of his occupation, Kazutaka often saw adolescent romances blossom. He had a sort of sixth sense about such feelings and sometimes could sense who was attracted to whom quite clearly. The teens tried hard to conceal their emotions but Kazutaka could sense the truth.

Some kids acted gruff towards the person they were interested in. Others called people ugly when they thought they were cute. Very occasionally, kids would confess their honest feelings. Though in those cases, their words were often taken as a joke and not seriously at all. Adolescent romance was very tricky. Young people were innocent, yet awkward and clumsy. Their relationships could be more complicated than those between adults.

Looking closely, Ren exhibited the signs of a man who had a secret crush. To Kazutaka's eyes, chief Fuwa was an elegant, stylish and mature person who acted very gentle and considerate. Kazutaka wondered how old Fuwa-san was. He guessed him to be over thirty. Maybe Fuwa was the type of person who became more and more attractive as he aged.

Kazutaka thought Ren, on the other hand, was probably about the same age as himself. But because Kazutaka looked rather young for his age, Ren probably thought Kazutaka was younger. He thought about asking Ren his age, but then he had second thoughts. Why ask the age of a thief? Ren's age was none of Kazutaka's business anyway.

Ren worked silently. Kazutaka could only see Ren's head, forehead, and eyes. The bottom half of his face was behind the small screen shaped like a TV. Kazutaka could see the reflection of the screen display in Ren's eyes. His dark, earnest eyes glittered beautifully.

Kazutaka wondered what motives they had for stealing the jewelry. Fuwa had explained that he was the thief and the others were just helpers. The distinction between the principal culprit and accomplices might matter to them, but they were all just criminals regardless. Kazutaka wanted to know why they broke the law to obtain what was inside the case.

At seven o'clock in the morning, Ren called somebody while still watching the monitor.

"Hello, Ōkuni-kun. I've been kind of tied up since last night. It's a rush job. So, can you handle the factory alone today? Remember the security verifications and design tolerances. Also, don't forget the safety check list. Today's jobs are continuations of yesterday's jobs, like polishing the gears and the platform of that spectrometer. If everything goes right, I'll be back by evening. Be there as soon as I can. Thank you. "

Kazutaka guessed that Ren normally worked in a machinery factory.

At nine o'clock in the morning, Fuwa gave Kazutaka permission to call the board of education since two out of four locks had already been opened. Kazutaka asked for a day off, saying he wasn't feeling well. They simply told him to take care.

“I’m actually missing but nobody seems to know that, Fuwa-san. It must be true that Shīno hasn’t notified the authorities. If the police had started an investigation, the board of education people would have asked me a whole bunch of questions.”

Fuwa nodded, looking a little stern.

“I’m guessing Shīno was the only one who knew that Kazutaka-san was transporting the jewelry to the police station last night.”

“What about the driver of the security company?”

“No one is watching the driver, but most likely, he isn’t taking any action. Either Shīno hushed him up afterward or...”

“Or what?”

Fuwa was thinking that Shīno had planned all this from the beginning. The driver had probably been instructed in advance not to say anything to anybody no matter what happens.

“What is Shīno thinking?”

“He gave us this attaché case as a decoy and he’s keeping the real goods, probably.”

“If that’s the case, isn’t Shīno committing a crime?”

“Not exactly. He might lose a friend, though.”

It was shocking to Kazutaka to think that Shīno looked on him as a disposable friend.

As if to confirm their suspicions, the lookout called to inform them that the Shīno Jewelry store had not opened at 10 a.m. as scheduled.

Kazutaka attempted to call Shīno at home and at the store. No one answered and the call went straight to the answering machine both times.

“No answer. What’s going on? Did Shīno take off somewhere, Fuwa-san?”

“Since he got home from the police station last night, Shīno hasn’t stepped outside. He has to be home.”

“Why the answering machine then?”

Suspicions about Shīno began to spread in Kazutaka's mind. Suspecting his friend while trusting the thieves seemed a ridiculous notion at first, but all of these suspicious activities made Kazutaka believe Fuwa's story.

Ren was still operating the equipment to open the case. It was now more than five hours since he'd started working on the third lock. Ren couldn't figure out the correct frequency even despite having checked into the far-infrared range.

"This is not working," Ren muttered with a serious look. Kazutaka grew nervous.

"If the contents are fake, what's going to happen to your plan, Yuri? What does Bud say about that possibility?"

"The deal will be off. He's supposed to call the other party around noon tomorrow. No harm done if we call it off."

"Is the other party already in Japan?"

"They are. I think they're standing by at a hotel in Okinawa. We're to contact them to determine the rendezvous point. The final details regarding the deal will be discussed then."

Kazutaka had no clue what they were talking about. The only thing he understood was that the contents of the attaché case were to be used in some kind of deal.

"If Shīno gave me the fakes and is trying to run away with the real stuff, you shouldn't be here, Fuwa-san. You should go after the jewelry Shīno has, right?" That was the best scenario Kazutaka could come up with. Since he was not a thief, his idea probably sounded quite naive, but Fuwa reassured Kazutaka with a broad smile.

"You don't have to worry about us, Kazutaka-san. When one deal falls through, we can always look for another."

"Ah."

"You've been up all night. You must be exhausted, try to get some rest."

"I'm okay. I'm used to getting little sleep. But I would like to get back to work as soon as possible. There are only two full-time teachers for our class. We're

always in need of more hands. This time of year, I have career counseling to do and there is paperwork that needs preparing. It's a very important time. I don't know what's going through Shīno's mind, but I only want to get back to the school for my students."

"You're a nice teacher, taking good care of your pupils."

"It's the end of the school year, a tough time for the kids. If they have no place to go, or no place to be after graduation, they lose hope. Without hope, they lose ground. I consider it to be part of my responsibilities to find places where the students can belong and feel secure."

Fuwa nodded. He put the straw from the sports drink into Kazutaka's mouth and sighed softly.

Kazutaka was watching Fuwa sidelong and thought he was kind of sexy. When Kazutaka looked away, Ren was frowning and still glaring at the camera. Ren was still trying to figure out the reason he couldn't find the right frequency. Ren looked very serious and handsome. Kazutaka felt an urge to cheer him up.

"Have you seen the Teardrop of the Nile before, Ren?" Kazutaka tried to strike up a conversation. Ren took his eyes off the screen and shook his head.

"I've never seen the actual jewel, not even a picture of it. I have heard the name, though. What about you, Kazutaka? You've seen it, right?"

"No, I haven't. I only saw a black bag. I never got to see what was inside of it."

Ren went over to the table and picked the magazine up. He brought it over and opened it to the correct page for Kazutaka to see.

"It was originally unearthed from some ancient ruins. Over three thousand years old, they say. The stone is rough, not cut. But the size and number of the tanzanites make this jewelry piece truly one of a kind."

"If it's part of the cultural heritage of mankind, it's best to return it to the owner. Didn't you say it belonged to the British Museum?"

"The one on permanent display is just a replica anyway. The genuine jewels must be kept in their underground vault. It's not safe to keep twenty billion yen on public view continually."

“How did they come up with the idea of stealing it?”

“Their motives...well that’s not for me to say. But I can tell you this. Yuri didn’t steal this for selfish reasons. Yuri is...” Ren paused and looked over at Fuwa. “He just steals. No matter how expensive the loot is, he doesn’t pocket even a penny.”

“You're talking too much, Ren,” Fuwa hushed him and Ren stopped talking. Kazutaka could feel there was some kind of bond between these two. Ren, in particular, felt a strong loyalty towards Fuwa, Kazutaka sensed.

Ren took out a small laptop from his tool box. He placed it in front of Kazutaka and turned it on.

“This site is popular among billionaires, collectors, buyers, auction organizers, and theft rings. It contains information on jewelry from all over the world. We should be able to find a description of the Teardrop of the Nile somewhere on this site. You met our boss, Bud West, earlier. He's the site's owner, Kazutaka-san.”

“Really?”

“His nickname is Stone Hunter. Very appropriate, don’t you think? Bud is gathering information on stolen jewels from all over the world. He sometimes supplies information as well.”

There are all kinds of informants. Most of them are jewelry dealers and merchants. Then there are owners of stolen jewelry, legitimate buyers, illegal buyers, auction organizers, *etc.* Occasionally, there are thieves, students, archeologists, as well as insurance agents.

“The site doesn’t discuss regular stones that would be the object of small and reasonable deals. It only talks about the pieces with names. Namely, famous jewels.”

“Famous jewels?”

“One of the most famous one is called the “Star of Sierra Leone,” which is almost 1,000 carats. There are also certain kinds of stones that may be small but are very rare, such as the “Red Diamond.” The red diamond is infamous for having caused a fierce battle among theft rings.”

The screen showed pictures and descriptions of jewelry in English. Given his poor English skills, Kazutaka couldn't understand the content very well. Ren pointed out the topic headings.

"It says there's a rumor that the Teardrop of the Nile was stolen on its way back to England after an overseas exhibit in America eight months ago. The British Museum denied the rumor, but they also discovered that one of the world's renowned theft rings moved their team from America to England. They can't deny the possibility of the jewel having been stolen."

"The Teardrop of the Nile was presumably moved to the vault upon its return to England. They haven't put it back out onto their permanent exhibit. They don't have any witnesses of the transport. The jewelry is supposed to have come back from America, but nobody really knows whether or not it is actually being stored in the vault at the British Museum."

"How do you research stuff like this? Who is Bud?"

"He's a teacher at an English conversation school near the train station."

"Well, that's only his cover, right? What is he really?"

"Bud calls himself a sculptor. I don't know him very well, either. If you want to know more about him, go to the English conversation school and ask him directly."

"I see."

Kazutaka was gladdened to see a milder expression on Ren's face. When he smiled, Ren was totally a different person, looking kind and gentle.

Kazutaka has seen similar expressions quite often at his school. When students taunted him by saying, "You're no good, sensei," Kazutaka would simply reply with a "Sorry." Then the students would smile as if to say, "He's an amiable fellow." At that moment, Kazutaka felt the walls between teacher and students become a bit shorter. If he were a normal authority figure, perched on a proverbial high horse, that wouldn't happen. His senior teachers, who were also popular among students, often made use of the same tactics to break down barriers and create communication with the students. When sincere two-way communication happened, people were happy.

“The next item is on a blue diamond auction that was held in Singapore in October last year. Bud participated in that one.”

“He went to Singapore?”

“No, he didn’t. He participated via an Internet real time auction. The organizers of that had announced that hard-to-find tanzanite would be auctioned in the near future. The thieves must have gotten really excited about that news.”

“They thought it may be the Teardrop of the Nile on the auction block, right?”

“Right. Then in December of last year, correspondence came informing us that someone had broken into a safe-deposit vault in Singapore that had a state-of-the-art security system. Everyone thought the Teardrop of the Nile must have been stolen. A lot of people put reports of sightings on message board here as to who the thief was or where the tanzanite was. However, 90 percent of those are just rumors, lies, or headline-seeking baloney. But, very rarely, there’s truth. Bud looks for that.”

“In the midst of the flux of all that conflicting information, Bud became convinced that the Teardrop of the Nile was actually still in the Orient somewhere, most likely in Japan. As for me, I can’t tell what’s true or false. I simply haven't the foggiest idea.”

“I can’t tell, either. With a famous stone like that, there are always numerous replicas floating around. Until you have the real one in your hands, you can never know what’s fake or real.”

“But Shīno can tell. He’s a jeweler.”

“He does appraisals for people. We suspect that Shīno appraised some goods and found out they were stolen materials, but charged an excessive commission and so he didn’t report the incident to the police.”

Kazutaka clicked his tongue, thinking of his friend’s face. Kazutaka hadn’t known about any of Shīno’s shady business.

“So it’s possible Shīno received a customer with a fishy background. You know, the kind of people who’d hesitate to take their products to a big established jeweler. Shīno Jewelry is in a small town. The store is small and discreet. The

owner's president is young and aggressive. Everyone has an eye on him. He's a magnet for thieves, and buyers contact him constantly, including those who bring in stolen goods, those who try to intercept them, and those who seek to sell them. Shīno attracts them all. Yuri has been watching Shīno for nearly a year."

Seemingly, this time, a French person posing as a tourist brought what could have been the Teardrop of the Nile into Shīno's store. This had happened around 8 p.m. last night. Shīno must have immediately appraised the item and called Kazutaka around nine.

Ken, who had been watching Shīno's store, saw him call Kazutaka in and arrange for a security company's transport car. Ken guessed the destination would be the police department. Bringing the jewels out without the French person's consent would mean reporting it to authorities. Ken thought it was not like Shīno to do that, but the illegal goods he had dealt with were in the ten million yen range at most. Never anything like the Teardrop of the Nile, which was worth twenty billion yen.

Ken thought Shīno might have chickened out because this deal was so huge. Ken informed Fuwa and Fuwa decided to get a hold of the jewels, which was how the heist came about.

"Does Fuwa-san always do this?"

"No, not always. Only when he has a specific objective, which is only once every other year or so."

"And you take the jewelry somewhere and sell it?"

"Yes."

"Somebody would actually buy it? Someone who could afford twenty billion yen?"

"Bud's grandfather could. He's into the preservation of cultural heritage items."

"The grandson steals it and then the grandfather buys it? Um, that's kind of strange, don't you think?"

“Bud’s grandfather is an art collector and a conscientious buyer who is enthusiastic about preserving antiques. For him, twenty billion yen is a drop in the bucket. He takes very good care of the art pieces and keeps them in perfect condition. He's also very careful not to let them get stolen. In a way, he handles his collection not much differently than art museums.”

“There's a lot of jewelry that has taken a similar route and ended up in the hands of various wealthy individuals. Those people don’t buy things just because the diamonds are big or they are expensive. If there's an art piece with historical value, and they think they can provide the best care for it, then they acquire it. Sometimes they return the piece to a museum when the time is right. So actually, it’s not a bad solution at all. Plus, when wealthy individuals get a hold of them, the historical value of the stone itself is respected. They won’t end up cut into smaller diamonds for easy sale.”

Kazutaka sighed because he had always thought such an outlandish story only ever happened in movies or novels.

Fuwa brought a blanket. “Do you want to rest a little, Kazutaka-san? I’ll put a blanket on you. Ren, let me know when you succeed in unlocking the third one.”

Ren stopped chatting and got back to work.

Kazutaka suddenly felt extremely tired once Fuwa put a blanket on him. Ren was gazing intently into the monitor, not even blinking. Ren’s face began to blur as Kuzutaka looked at him.

“When can you unlock the third one, Ren?”

“I have no way of knowing that yet. Get some sleep if you want.”

“You're not sleeping, Ren?”

“That wouldn’t be good for you. If I take a break now, the case won’t be opened before evening. You'd still be in this R.V. as it heads for Kyushu on the ferry.”

“I don’t want to be on the boat. I get seasick.”

Kazutaka wanted the attaché case opened before the ferry sailed.

For some reason, Ren looked more relaxed than half a day ago.

“Would you like me to sing you a lullaby?”

Kazutaka couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He thought Ren was a workaholic, who didn’t mind getting his hand in Kazutaka’s pants if it helped Fuwa. That same Ren now sounded very sweet.

“What kind of lullaby?”

Ren started singing. Kazutaka thought he shouldn’t complain but he thought it was a sad song and didn’t sound much like a lullaby.

“What kind of song is that, Ren?”

“A Russian folk song called Stars of Labor.”

“What does the song mean?”

“The iron is hot inside the kiln. Swinging picks sound along the railroad. The wagons move on icy earth. Things like that.”

“You like that kind of song, huh?”

“I do.”

Songs are good, Kazutaka agreed. Ren smiled and continued singing. The flashing light from the monitor shone on Ren’s face and eyes. Kazutaka felt confusion over the intimate moment they were sharing. After all, Kazutaka was the victim of a kidnapping while Ren was a member of a crime ring. Kazutaka still didn’t approve of theft and kidnapping, but he didn’t feel any hostility towards them. Instead, he was relaxed enough to feel sleepy. Ren was actually quite handsome. His song choice left much to be desired, but Ren was singing for Kazutaka who decided to fall asleep to Ren’s “lullaby.”

Kazutaka closed his eyes, still listening to Ren’s song. Kazutaka imagined a faraway land. He imagined laborers swinging picks to set the railroad tracks. Ren’s face fused with that of a Russian laborer. Kazutaka curled his lips into a soft smile as he lay with his eyes closed.

I’m going back to work tomorrow, both for the children waiting for me and for myself. I’ll work hard and get to see children smile. I’ll let hope grow no matter how small or slim, for hope is what keeps spirits high.

“The iron is hot inside the kiln. Swinging picks sound along the railroad. The

wagons move on icy earth with bells jingling. Snow gets kicked up in the air by heavy hooves." Kazutaka fell asleep, listening to Ren's lullaby.

In the end, it took Ren over seven hours to pick the third lock.

At 4 p.m., Ren told Fuwa that the case could not be opened before the departure time and the last one would need to be opened on the ferry. Fuwa took out his cell phone and stepped outside the R.V. to call Bud. Kazutaka was still fast asleep.

It was true that Kazutaka hadn't slept the night before, but Ren thought it was bold of him to be sound asleep inside a crime ring's R.V. As Ren looked down at Kazutaka's sleeping face, he found himself smiling. The more Ren looked at him, the younger Kazutaka appeared. Kazutaka appeared even more childlike in his sleep than he did awake. According to conventional wisdom, being a middle school teacher was a tough job. Ren could imagine how stressful it could be to deal with children who wouldn't listen to him. Ren wondered how a softy like Kazutaka managed his work so well. Kazutaka's left hand, which was connected to the attaché case, was outside the blanket. Kazutaka couldn't turn over, either. The entire time Ren had looked at the monitor, Kazutaka had never even once rolled about trying. Ren worried that Kazutaka would have aching muscles once he woke up. Right now though, Kazutaka was sleeping soundly with a soft smile upon his face. He'd probably also have a sore back when he awoke. He wasn't sturdily built from tough manual labor. In fact, his wrist was as thin as that of a middle schooler.

Ren felt sorry for Kazutaka and found himself stroking Kazutaka's cheeks. Kazutaka didn't show any response. If awake, Kazutaka would have looked prim or gotten defiant, but he was vulnerable in his sleep. Ren got carried away and pinched Kazutaka's cheek softly. Then he got bold. Ren pulled Kazutaka's cheeks apart and pressed his palms into them. Kazutaka didn't stir.

"He really is sleeping deeply." Ren then found himself wondering, *Where does our consciousness go when people are asleep?* As a technical person, Ren rarely considered such metaphysical things.

Kazutaka had an unusual face, with a small nose and mouth. These parts of his

face were close to his nose in the center. His eyes were large, like a fawn's. When Kazutaka was awake, his eyes tended to cross slightly and droop. Rather than beautiful or handsome, he was childlike and cute. Kazutaka's facial features were very close to the golden proportions of popular dolls. Ren was watching him closely while thinking about his facial shape and design. Just then, Kazutaka's eyes snapped open.

Oops, he woke up.

Ren felt flustered by this, though he schooled his face so that this didn't show. Ren's face was almost too close to Kazutaka's to be simply looking at his sleeping face. Ren started thinking what he would say if Kazutaka asked what he was doing. Silently, Ren waited in a cold sweat. Then with his eyes wide open, Kazutaka exclaimed, "That section will be on the exam!"

It was an alarmingly loud voice. It rang out loud and clear. Then Kazutaka winked charmingly, closed his eyes again and went back to sleep.

Talking in his sleep. Ren was relieved. "Phew. That was a surprise."

Ren moved quietly away from Kazutaka and sat down on the floor. The cot Kazutaka was sleeping on was about chest height for Ren from this position. Looking into Kazutaka's face, Ren felt heartache. Even in this miserable state, Kazutaka was teaching in his sleep. That proved his goodness and sense of dedication. While he was awake, Ren had thought Kazutaka was strange and more than a little bizarre, but sleeping, he appeared angelic. Then, all of a sudden, he'd spoken in his sleep saying, "That section will be on the exam!" He'd even winked, too. It seemed hard to believe, but maybe he actually was very popular with his students.

Ren thought of Kazutaka's daily life. He hadn't mentioned any family. He didn't appear to be married and Ren wondered if he lived alone.

Ren remembered how embarrassed Kazutaka was when he'd taken him to the bathroom and opened his fly for him before they started working on the locks. That had been oddly funny. Kazutaka had protected his groin with his free right hand and said, "Don't touch me down there. Don't touch me, please." Kazutaka had walked out with his hand still covering his groin, as if making extra sure he wasn't going to be touched.

Not a romantic sight, but it was an adorably cute one. But then again, Ren didn't think Kazutaka had cared what his sentiments were.

Ren started packing up his equipment and tools, glancing at Kazutaka's face from time to time. Ren had been thinking about trying to make it back to the factory by evening, but it didn't look like he was going to make it. Ren called Ōkuni-kun and told him to close the factory for three days.

"We're getting onto the ferry now, Ren. How is Kazutaka-san doing?"

"Sleeping. Should I wake him up?"

"No. He must be tired. Let him sleep. When the other passengers retire to their compartments, we can move to our cabin. That'll give Kazutaka-san another hour or so to sleep."

Ren nodded. He placed his tools and other equipment required for his task into a carrying case, ready for moving.

"That was the first time I've ever heard you sing a lullaby, Ren."

"That was the first time I've sung."

Fuwa shrugged his shoulders mischievously, as if to imply something, and put a coat over Ren. Fuwa was always thoughtful. Ren had only had his work jacket on when he came. Fuwa must have picked up a nicer travel coat for Ren from somewhere. It was a well-tailored duffel coat. The choice admittedly may have been influenced by Bud's personal tastes.

"Are you getting along well with Bud, Yuri?"

"Hard to say."

"This is going to be the last job, right? Do you promise that you won't do anything like this again?"

"Bud wants to do one more job if the contents inside the attaché case turn out to be fake. But I don't feel the thrill or excitement of doing this any longer. I think it's about time."

"You would quit this to go back to the hotel as a concierge?"

“I’m quitting the hotel at the end of this month, too. I thought I told you that I was going to get a part-time job at a convenience store.”

Ren almost told Fuwa to come back to him, but he didn’t. Ren knew that Fuwa wouldn’t linger over the past. Ren felt something touching his knee. It was Kazutaka’s left hand, the hand chained to the attaché case. His wrist was red and swollen, probably from rubbing against the handcuffs. Ren thought about putting a protective wristband on Kazutaka once they got on the ferry. Then he realized that a wristband wouldn’t work because of the attaché case. Ren figured he could use a bandage instead. Ren crouched down beside the cot.

Ren saw Fuwa’s legs move away from him. Todo was standing on the other side of the table with his arms crossed.

“Is Kazutaka-san still sleeping, Ren?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t he say he tends to get seasick?”

Ren thought about this with his mouth tightly shut. He only had a vague recollection. Ren was amazed that Todo remembered what Kazutaka had said. Todo approached them with an unusual smile upon his normally gruff face.

“This guy looks more like a student than a teacher.”

“Yeah, he is just like a child,” Ren agreed but Todo shook his head.

“I don’t think he’s like a little kid. He’s actually quite steady and mature. Well, he’s still a cutie all right.”

Todo grabbed Ren’s elbow and squeezed it really hard just around the nerve. Ren yelped and pushed Todo back. “I have a very strong grip. Do you want to arm wrestle me, Ren?”

“No, thank you. I'd be unable to continue working if I get hurt now.”

“Do you really want to let this sensei go home soon? Once we're on board, we’ll have to stay together for a day and a half anyway. Just take it slowly.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Todo grinned, as if he wanted to say something else but didn’t. Todo wasn't

one for idle chatter with people. He didn't usually call anyone a cutie, either. Todo was generally a blunt man. Ren thought it was strange that Todo was speaking to him like this with a smile on his face. Ren wondered what Todo was really trying to say, but the R.V. started moving. Ren didn't have a chance to ask Todo about his true intentions.

At 5:00 p.m. The R.V. embarked on the ferry with Kazutaka still asleep. They had initially reserved two cabins: one for Bud and Fuwa, and the other one for Toshi and Todo. They had to make a change of plans. It was decided that Ren and Kazutaka would take one cabin and Fuwa and Todo the other. Bud and Toshi, who got bumped, would take the Shinkansen bullet train. Around noon in two days' time, the ferry would arrive in northern Kyushu. Ren and Kazutaka were to fly home afterwards from there.

It wouldn't be Kazutaka's preference but there was no other choice. Fuwa intended to release Kazutaka regardless of the authenticity of the contents of the attaché case. *When that happens*, Ren thought, *I will have to accompany Kazutaka*.

Fuwa looked a little down because Bud would not be with him during the ferry ride, even though Bud wasn't used to being in on the jobs or the follow-ups himself. Besides, his Anglo-Saxon appearance would definitely stand out. It wasn't a good idea for him to come along with Kazutaka and the others on the ferry.

"Hey, we're on the ferry now. Wake up." Ren poked Kazutaka and Kazutaka tossed his head, wanting more sleep.

"Let me sleep." Kazutaka wouldn't let go of the blanket, but they couldn't stay in the car for too long after they boarded. Doors between the vehicle area and the cabins would be closed one hour after departure.

"You'll be stuck here for almost two days without eating or being able to go to the bathroom unless you wake up now." Ren tugged at Kazutaka, a little harder than before.

"Okay, okay. I'll get up." Kazutaka sat up reluctantly and immediately flopped back down "Ouch." He had forgotten about the handcuffs on his wrist connecting him to the attaché case.

“Are you awake now? We’re already on the ferry. We’ll be going to northern Kyushu on this, so, let’s move into our cabin.”

Kazutaka eyes widened and he stared at Ren for a few seconds before he plaintively said, “No way.”

He sounded like a child, who went to buy goodies only to find they were sold out.

“I couldn’t unlock the last one. I’ll resume my work inside the cabin. After I am successful in getting the contents out, we’ll fly back. Understood?”

“Do you mean to say that I’m on the ferry now? Am I really?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, no. What am I going to do? I get severely seasick.”

“The departure time is seven o’clock. Once the boat starts moving, we’ll be on it all day tomorrow. We get to northern Kyushu around noon the day after tomorrow. You’ll be flying back to Tokyo with me after that. So be prepared.”

It soon became obvious that Kazutaka wasn’t exaggerating about his seasickness. Even before the ferry started moving, he began to get nauseous and covered his mouth.

“Are you going to throw up? Are you okay? Hold on until we get to the cabin.” “Ahh. Ugh. Oh, no. I’m gonna puke.”

Ren quickly covered Kazutaka’s mouth.

“Sorry, Todo-san, but can you bring our stuff? Where’s our room, Yuri?”

“It’s the deluxe cabin.”

Ren ran up the stairs, taking Kazutaka with him. Once on deck, Ren took him to the railing, let him lean over it, and removed his hand from Kazutaka’s mouth.

“Ughh!” Kazutaka threw up, sounding like a goat braying. It wasn’t a pleasant sight but Ren felt somewhat responsible for Kazutaka’s current predicament.

“Are you okay? It that all of it?” Ren stroked Kazutaka’s back while supporting the attaché case. With watering red eyes, Kazutaka replied, “Ugh. There’s more.”

Then it sounded like a screaming goat again.

“Sorry. It’s my fault. It took me too long to unlock the third one. Are you okay? Well, obviously you're not. Just take your time and get it all out.”

There was another round of unpleasant sounds, but that finally seemed to be the last of it.

Ren helped Kazutaka to their cabin only to find Fuwa waiting for them with the key. Fuwa frowned as he saw the miserable state Kazutaka was in.

“He gets seasick easily, huh? What should we do? Do you want me to switch rooms with you, Ren? Is it better if I take care of him?”

“This is the only time you can rest, Yuri. Don’t worry about us. I’ll take care of him.”

Fuwa wore a blank look for a second. There was an awkward silence. Then Fuwa smiled and said, “Thank you. I’ll be in the next room. Give me a call if you need me. I’ll get you some seasickness medicine in a bit, Kazutaka-san.”

“That’d be great,” Kazutaka thanked Fuwa with his head bowed down.

Kazutaka looked like a drunk, staggering and swaying back and forth. He looked to be in really bad shape. The moment they stepped inside the cabin, Kazutaka collapsed, going to all fours. Ren lifted him and the attaché case and brought him to the bed. He then hurriedly got a wet towel, rushed back, and gently wiped Kazutaka’s face with the towel.

“Thank you and sorry for the trouble.” Kazutaka feebly said. Although he still had tears in his eyes, Kazutaka smiled a little, but it was clear that he was having a hard time talking.

Ren cocked his head. He felt as if something had physically pierced his heart. He placed his hand upon his chest but he couldn’t find any foreign object stuck there. Wondering what it was, Ren rinsed the towel again and came back to the bed.

“So, you don’t do well on boats, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Did you feel like this when you were on a ship the last time?”

Kazutaka nodded through teary eyes.

“There was a time we went on a week-long cruise. But I got doctor’s orders to discontinue the trip. I went home alone in the middle of it.”

“You have problems with your inner ear?”

“After that incident, I even get seasick just from seeing the ocean on television.”

That was really severe, Ren thought. Ren felt bad about not being able to open the case while they were still on land. His first estimate was five hours each and twenty hours total for all four of the locks. Since he finished the first one rather swiftly, contrary to his expectation, Ren might have let his vigilance slip.

If he'd had a high speed scanner, Ren could have finished the job sooner. *People have to pay a price for being overconfident*, Ren spoke to the memory of his father.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

“Yes, please.”

Ren helped Kazutaka up and took him to the bathroom inside their cabin. Ren helped Kazutaka pull his pants down and sit on the toilet seat. Previously, when they'd gone to the public restroom in the park in the middle of night, Kazutaka had yelled and screamed in embarrassment. Kazutaka didn’t say anything this time. He probably didn’t have any energy left for that. After Kazutaka was done, Ren helped him by pulling his pants up and took him back to the bed.

The bathroom was done, now time for his clothes. Kazutaka has been wearing the same suit ever since he'd been kidnapped. Naturally, he didn’t have a change of clothes with him. Ren loosened his tie and shirt. Looking down on Kazutaka, Ren asked, “Should I remove your suit?”

The problem was the attaché case on his left hand. With the case still attached, they couldn’t remove the suit without cutting it. Ren made Kazutaka sit up to get his right arm out of the sleeve but his left arm was still covered.

“Hmm. I don’t like this.”

“You don’t like what?”

“I want to take it all off.”

“It feels so much better already. I’ll be okay with the way it is now.”

“Shall I cut it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cut your suit.”

“No, you can’t do that. Shīno gave me this suit to wear. He said it was an expensive Italian suit. If you ruin it, I’ll feel bad for Shīno.”

Ren was bewildered to see Kazutaka worrying about the man who had deceived him. Ren was determined to take the suit off. He held Kazutaka’s left hand to point at the seam on the sleeve.

“I won’t cut the fabric, just the threads.”

Ren took out a cutter from the tool box. From the left cuff to armpit, Ren started slowly cutting along the seam. Then Ren moved along the seam from armpit to the side of suit.

Once he was done with the outer fabric, Ren moved onto the backing. He paid close attention so as not to damage the fabric as he cut the stitches one by one. An hour later, the suit was disassembled along the sleeve and body of the left side. It rather resembled a piece of dried fish.

“Wow. That is some kind of craftsmanship...” Kazutaka looked much more relaxed now that all he had on was a dress shirt.

“You’ll be cold when we go outside later. You’ll need something else to keep you warm then.”

“I’ll be all right if it’s just for a short time.”

“No, we can’t let you catch cold. Oh, I know. I’ll get some clothes from the store downstairs and fashion them into a cape or something. If I can make it into a cape like Little Riding Hood, you can go outside even with the case still on.”

“Can’t you just get a large fleece jacket? I could just drape it over myself.”

“If you are wearing clothes with sleeves, you should put your arms through.”

Kazutaka looked up at Ren, dumbfounded.

“What do you care?”

“Products should be used as intended.”

“You’re so uptight.” Kazutaka looked at Ren for several moments. “Actually, you're quite nice, Ren.”

Kazutaka had an innocently adorable smile. Ren felt that sharp sensation in his heart again. It was painless and quick but Ren was aware that something was going on inside him. Ren wondered what it meant. Tilting his head to one side slightly, Ren looked back at Kazutaka.

Once the ferry started moving, Kazutaka lay back down on the bed. *He must be feeling nauseous again. He's gone very pale*. Kazutaka sighed deeply and pushed the attaché case to the side. “Go ahead.”

Ren got the hint. Kazutaka was telling him to get back to work on unlocking the case. Ren felt sorry for him. Ren opened the tool bag that held his equipment, but he quickly lost motivation as he saw Kazutaka’s pale looks. For the first time, Ren didn’t feel much had like doing the task at hand.

Ren had woken up yesterday morning, worked at the factory until nine that night, left to meet with Fuwa, and then started working on this job. That meant Ren hadn’t slept for 36 hours straight. Ren decided he should take the time to have a nap. They couldn’t let Kazutaka go while they were on the ferry anyway.

Kazutaka was lying on his stomach. It looked like he was dozing off. Because of his seasickness, it was probably easier on Kazutaka to be asleep. Ren thought Kazutaka’s sleeping face looked agonized this time, different from his previously peaceful look and Ren wondered what Kazutaka would say the next time he talked in his sleep.

Going next door, Ren told Fuwa that he was going to grab some sleep. Coming back to his room, Ren collapsed down on the other bed. The moment his head hit the pillow, Ren was out.

“Excuse me. Can you wake up?”

Kazutaka called out from his bed. He had a ringing headache. Ren lay spread-

eagled in his sleep.

“What should I do? He won’t wake up.”

Kazutaka needed to use the toilet. If he couldn’t wake Ren up, he would just have to go on his own. Nobody else was there. It was 2 a.m. Kazutaka only wanted to go to the bathroom, after all. He felt that he should be able to do it by himself.

Kazutaka stumbled as he tried to get out of the bed. Pulled down by the weight of the attaché case, Kazutaka fell to the floor. Even on all fours, Kazutaka felt nauseous. He nevertheless managed to crawl and slither his way to the bathroom.

Kazutaka thought about getting up to turn the light on. Then he had second thoughts. What if he fell again and hit his head against something and died? That’d be an embarrassing way to go. Also, it wouldn’t be very nice for Ren to wake up and find Kazutaka’s body in front of the toilet. Kazutaka had gotten a bad first impression of Ren, because Ren had an insolent attitude and was a friend of thieves. But after spending the whole day with him, Kazutaka felt close to Ren. He didn’t want to put Ren on the spot. Kazutaka should be able to go without using the light.

From a sitting position on the floor, Kazutaka opened the bathroom door and struggled to get inside. Kazutaka didn’t think he could go while standing up, so he got ready and sat down on the toilet seat. Kazutaka lifted the attaché case and placed it on his lap, then sighed deeply.

He leaned back against the toilet lid and looked up at the ceiling. The ceiling seemed to be undulating. Then, since he had a hard time remaining steady, he managed to hit his head hard against the door when leaving the bathroom.

“Ouch. Oh, that hurts.”

Kazutaka felt miserable. He was far away from home. He wouldn't be able to get to Nagomi Kyōshitsu tomorrow, either. Plus, Kazutaka was seasick and the attaché case was still attached to him. Everything that had happened since Sunday afternoon was horrible.

He crawled his way back but didn’t have enough energy left to get back onto

the bed. His seasickness was rather serious. Kazutaka knew he wouldn't feel any better until he got off the ferry. He felt dizzy and nauseous. It felt as though something terrible was hitting him in between his eyes. With every step, he hobbled. With every move, he wanted to throw up.

Kazutaka had once watched a movie about a pianist who spent the end of his life on a ship. He'd gotten seasick inside the movie theater. He knew that getting seasick while watching a movie or TV was simply psychosomatic. Kazutaka just couldn't help thinking that he was going to get sick. That was the reason. It had nothing to do with the semicircular canal in his ear. This meant that Kazutaka might not be feeling this way if he hadn't known they were on a ferry. Kazutaka thought he might have been okay if they only had kept him inside the R.V. and told him they were still on land. But inside the R.V., there was no bathroom and no food. Kazutaka could go without changing clothes or taking a bath, but basic physiological phenomena couldn't be ignored.

Kazutaka slowly poked his head up between the beds to see Ren's sleeping face. Ren was facing Kazutaka, half of his face buried in the sheets. Ren looked intense while watching the monitor when working, but appeared rather peaceful in his sleep. If Ren kept his serious and stern looks even when sleeping, he wouldn't be able to spend the night with a lover, Kazutaka thought. He put his chin on the edge of his bed and kept watching Ren's face.

The bridge of his nose had a nice shape, Kazutaka thought. His own nose tipped upwards. Kazutaka's parents reassured him that he looked cute, but he didn't like his nose. He believed his nose was 80 percent of the reason that people said he had a baby face.

Ren's nose on the other hand, was quite prominent and dignified. Depending on how the light fell, Kazutaka could clearly see its shadow on Ren's cheek. Yuri Fuwa-san, the chief, was handsome. Ren was also handsome, just in a different way, Kazutaka thought.

His job as a teacher was to find the strengths of each and every single one of his students and to help them develop further. So it was Kazutaka's habit to look for people's strengths and virtues. Ren's strength, to his mind, was his diligence and refined aristocratic expression.

Kazutaka could tell that Ren was trying his hardest to open the attaché case. Ren had been really nice when Kazutaka had vomited shortly after getting on the ferry, too. Ren had also helped him take off his suit. He'd even said that he was going to get some warm clothing for Kazutaka later.

Ren is probably a good-hearted person, Kazutaka decided. Ren looked sincere and proficient. Kazutaka would have liked to ask him what kind of work he did, how he lived, etc., if they had met under different circumstances. They would have enjoyed regular conversation. But that was if, and only if, they had met under normal conditions.

It was clear to Kazutaka that Ren was not chatty. He rarely spoke while working. Ren responded when other members talked to him, but he didn't initiate conversation.

Ren spoke only of what was necessary and always in a proper manner. Ren was tightly focused on his task. Kazutaka admired that and thought he was really cool. Kazutaka stretched out his arm and touched Ren's cheek softly. Ren's jaw was solid and firm. *He must sleep with his jaw shut tight*. Kazutaka remembered having read in some book or other that people who engaged in physical labor tended to sleep with their mouths closed. On the contrary, Kazutaka occasionally slept with his mouth wide open. He was embarrassed to show his sleeping face to others.

Kazutaka was poking Ren's cheekbone with his index finger when Ren's eyelids twitched. Kazutaka anticipated Ren's awakening and slowly pulled his hand away. Ren opened his eyes slightly.

"What is it? Bathroom? I'll take you."

Ren might have been half asleep, but he was still attentive of Kazutaka's needs.

"I went already."

"I'm waking up. Just hang on... Don't overdo things."

"Go on back to sleep. It's still the middle of the night."

Ren smiled sleepily. Then he placed his hand on Kazutaka's head, stroked it gently a few times, and went right back to sleep.

His smile looked very kind, Kazutaka observed.

He kept watching the sleeping man's face, feeling sentimental. Kazutaka imagined how pleasant life would be with a guy like Ren. Kazutaka hadn't been lucky in his love relationships. He'd had less than a handful of boyfriends since middle school.

Actually, there had been only one serious relationship, back when Kazutaka was a college student. He'd really loved the boy, but the feeling turned out not to be mutual. To his partner, Kazutaka was just a whim. After being together for about a year, a girl asked Kazutaka's partner out on a date. His partner went to play tennis with her and simply never came back.

There had never been proper closure. Kazutaka quietly withdrew into himself and never asked him out again. His partner never contacted Kazutaka, either. Looking back, it simply wasn't meant to be.

When Kazutaka loved someone, he didn't become possessive. He didn't think of gains or losses either. To Kazutaka, such calculations should never play a part in a relationship. Even when he was sad, Kazutaka tried to keep his chin up and smile. He was loyal to his partners. He never raised his voice in an accusatory tone even when his partner was discovered to be unfaithful. He knew that different people acted differently. Depending on their personality or upbringing, the degree people clung to their relationships varied. Kazutaka simply wasn't the obsessive type.

Maybe this trait was one of the reasons Kazutaka was often left heart broken. *If I could feel victorious and successful when I won someone back*, Kazutaka thought, *my life would be a whole lot easier*. The hardest period was when Kazutaka was still in love with a boyfriend, but couldn't make himself ask him back. When Kazutaka met his ex walking with that woman, he tried to casually ask, "How are you doing?" But all he could manage was a very awkward greeting.

Kazutaka was ready for a long-lasting relationship. Rather than being madly in love for a short time only to have it burn out, Kazutaka wanted to treasure peaceful and happy times with someone he loved. Kazutaka was now 25. He wasn't interested in flirtations any more.

Kazutaka felt comforted when Ren, worrying about him, had stroked his head. It was as though the hostage teacher and the lock-picker had struck a sympathetic chord in each other. It felt really nice to sense Ren's thoughtfulness. Kazutaka wanted to hang onto that feeling. He was still suffering from seasickness. Nausea roiled even though there was nothing left in his stomach. Kazutaka was now determined to overcome this difficulty, thinking of Ren's kindness as moral support. He leaned on the edge of Ren's bed from where he sat on the floor and closed his eyes, head resting on his right arm.

At five o'clock in the morning, Ren woke up feeling rattled. Kazutaka was gone from the bed next to his. Ren jumped out of bed in alarm only to hear a scream coming from under his feet.

"Whoa!"

Ren had stepped on Kazutaka. "Idiot. Why are you sleeping there?" Ren asked as he sat back on his bed. Kazutaka was lying flat on the floor in the space between the two beds. Ren slowly remembered seeing Kazutaka's face on the edge of his bed when he had opened his eyes one time.

"Ah, right. You said you went to the restroom, huh? And then you couldn't get back up into bed? Is that why you're lying there? I'm sorry that I stepped on you. Did I hurt you?"

There was no reply. Ren was worried that he might have squashed Kazutaka to death. Ren timidly put his face close to Kazutaka's. Phew, Kazutaka was still breathing. It was just that he was deeply asleep again, not moving even when Ren jumped down on him.

"Unbelievable...that was scary."

Ren lifted Kazutaka and the attaché case together and set them down on the bed. He sighed in relief. Being manhandled from the floor to the bed didn't wake up Kazutaka, either. Ren noticed that Kazutaka's wrist was still red and swollen from the scrapes and scratches. As Ren looked at Kazutaka's wrist, he thought of Shīno, the jeweler.

Kazutaka had told them Shīno was his friend. Kazutaka wasn't in the jewelry

business and he didn't seem to be suited to the task of transporting valuables, yet Shīno had chained the attaché case to Kazutaka and sent him to deliver the goods to the police station. There was definitely something fishy about Shīno.

If Fuwa's theory was correct, Shīno was holding onto the Teardrop of the Nile gemstone that had been brought in by some anonymous French client while sending Kazutaka off with the replica. If that was the case, what was Shīno planning to do with the real Teardrop of the Nile?

He could be thinking about taking it to an illegal buyer in exchange for an outrageous commission. The French person who brought the jewelry in must have a criminal record. The jewelry had been entrusted to Shīno anyways. The client wouldn't report the theft even if Shīno got rid of it, either by turning it into the police or getting it to other buyers.

Kazutaka could only have been a decoy to temporarily distract rings of thieves like Fuwa's group. Shīno's true intentions were still unknown, but Kazutaka would have been made a fool of if the contents of this case were to be fake. Ren decided that he needed to find out more about Shīno. He opened the tool box, took out his cell phone, and turned the power on.

The Teardrop of the Nile was a famous piece of jewelry. Hundreds of search results were displayed on the screen. The top hit was the British Museum, the rightful owner of the gemstones. The jewelry page had a picture of the Teardrop of the Nile from when it was exhibited in America. It was a gigantic blue bib shaped design, hanging around the neck and spreading over the chest. It was definitely a very large accessory. Ren was amazed at how wealthy the ancient African king must have been. Next, he searched for Shīno Jewelry. He couldn't find a homepage for the store. Shīno Jewelry didn't advertise on the Internet, not surprising seeing as how it was just a medium sized business in a suburban city. Ren did find the name of store and its phone number in the directory on the Japan Jeweler's Federation website. He wrote down the information and decided to call using Kazutaka's cell phone.

The answering machine wasn't on. Ren figured Shīno might be asleep because it was still early in the morning. After ten rings or so, Ren hung up the phone. He tried again and someone answered after the third ring.

“Hello. This is Shīno speaking.”

The voice sounded rather young, Ren thought as he held the cell phone tightly. “Sorry to call you this early. Mr. Shīno, right? I'm Suzuki, the director of the Minamihama City Board of Education.”

“Oh? Are you Yui’s supervisor at school?”

Ren snickered. It was Shīno himself.

“Um, yes, I am. Mr. Yui was absent yesterday due to an illness, but I needed to contact him urgently regarding career counseling. I called his home but couldn’t get a hold of him. When I spoke to him Sunday night, Mr. Yui mentioned to me that he was going over to your house. So, I was hoping that you might know his whereabouts.”

If you thought about it, the call was fishy, but Ren hoped that he'd caught Shīno off guard just as he was getting up. Ren thought there was a chance to get some truth out of him before Shīno became suspicious.

“Well, Yui is not here. I assume he’s sleeping in his apartment. When he came over on Sunday, he went home after watching a video.”

His first lie, Ren thought to himself.

“I went over to his residence but he wasn’t there. When he called the school yesterday, it sounded like he was using a cell phone. I thought he may have gotten ill while he was visiting you and might be staying over at your place.”

“I would have taken him to a hospital if he had gotten ill. Wasn’t he calling from a hospital?”

“I called his primary care doctor and regular hospital but Yui-san didn’t visit either of them.”

There was an awkward silence. Ren guessed what Shīno was doing. He was probably looking at his watch, thinking that it was awfully early. After a while, Shīno responded.

“Ah, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know where he is.”

“I understand. Well then, could you please tell him to call the school immediately if you hear from Yui-san? I’d greatly appreciate it. Sorry to have

bothered you so early in the morning. Thank you."

With that, Ren hung up.

Kazutaka tried to roll over on bed, but the weight of the attaché case pulled him back.

"Wake up, Kazutaka."

Ren shook Kazutaka and dialed Shīno's number one more time.

"Wake up. Talk to Shīno, please."

"Um...huh? Why am I calling him now? He's probably still asleep."

"It's okay. Come on. He'll pick it up any minute now. Shīno was at home. You should complain to him."

"Complain? At this hour? Complaints should be made during business hours… Oh, Shīno? Good morning."

Shīno must have picked up again. Ren found it amusing that Kazutaka was politely greeting the man, despite the circumstances.

"Shīno, I have to tell you that I was kidnapped by a group of thieves and I can't come home yet."

After this, Kazutaka was mainly responding to Shīno, saying "yeah" or "right."

"They said they'd release me but I don't think I can bring the attaché back. Have you reported the theft to the police?"

Shīno spoke for a long time while Kazutaka simply nodded in response. After listening to Shīno for about a minute, Kazutaka head began to sway gently, probably getting sleepy again.

"I don't know where I am. Is someone standing watch? Yeah, there's one right here. I don't know how many of them there are. No, not just one, there are several of them, but I don't know how many. Sometimes there are more, sometimes there are less."

Shīno was obviously trying to get some information from Kazutaka.

Kazutaka was telling the truth but nothing crucial. He probably didn't know the exact number in the group or his exact location.

“Huh? That’d be okay? All right. I've got it. Oh, the City Board of Education called? Okay, I’ll call them. Yeah, got it. Talk to you later then. Bye.”

Kazutaka ended the call. He handed the cell phone back to Ren and lay back down on the bed.

“What did Shīno say to you, Kazutaka? Tell me before you go back to sleep.”

“The school called. They want me to contact them. And he told me not to tell anyone about being kidnapped.”

“Did he tell you the reason?”

“If he reports the theft to the police, the media may find out. That if the news comes out, more thieves would come after me and that would be quite dangerous. He's hoping for my safe return.”

How could Shīno say that with a straight face? Ren felt disgusted.

“Did Shīno say anything else, Kazutaka?”

“He said the design of this attaché case is very peculiar. He didn’t think regular thieves would be able to open it. But we knew that already, so it's not very helpful information.”

“Do you still trust Shīno?”

Kazutaka didn’t answer. Kazutaka normally placed his in trust and faith in people but it must have been obvious to him that Shīno was full of lies and excuses. Kazutaka most likely didn’t respond to Ren’s question because he was devastated by his friend’s betrayal.

Unforgivable.

Ren was furious. Ren called Shīno once more, thinking that perhaps the third time would be the charm.

“Yes, this is Shīno.”

His voice was clearer than before, defogged by sleep. Shīno was completely awake now, no doubt because he had received several phone calls in a row. Ren steadied his breath, preparing to scare him a little.

“We’ve got your attaché case. If you want it returned, bring 300 million yen to

Narita at one in the afternoon today. If you call the police, we'll send pictures of your friend's left hand and the empty attaché case to the media." Ren hung up the phone.

Kazutaka sat up in the bed, looking dumbfounded.

"Don't worry. I'm only threatening Shīno so that he won't get carried away."

"Poor Shīno. He's going to have nightmares about my bloody left hand."

"I didn't say that the left hand would be severed from your body. I meant to tell him that we'd send the body back with the left hand and the attaché case."

"That's tricky... You shouldn't threaten people, Ren."

Kazutaka now looked like a pushover. An eye for an eye just wasn't his style. Kazutaka was honest and sincere through and through. It wasn't an easy way to be. Kazutaka might appear frail but he actually had strong core principles, Ren observed.

"Can you open the last lock, Ren? Can you do it here?"

"You are something else."

Ren could not believe how calmly Kazutaka was smiling at him now. But Kazutaka just said, "Go ahead," then he lay down, pushing the attaché case towards the edge of the mattress.

"We'll find out what's inside in five hours, right? Then you guys are going to let me go. I'm going to save energy by sleeping while fighting my seasickness."

Given his situation, Kazutaka's positive attitude and words were almost heart shattering.

Ren wanted to get the job done as swiftly as possible, not for the contents of attaché case or Fuwa, but for Kazutaka. Ren brought the table closer and put the equipment and tools on top. Then he started scanning the fourth lock.

An hour later, Fuwa came over to check on them. Fuwa asked if they wanted anything to eat. Kazutaka said that he didn't want anything because everything he ate came back up anyway.

“I tried to bring some motion sickness medicine last night. I knocked several times but you didn’t answer the door, Ren.”

“Oh, did you? I fell asleep immediately.”

“Is that right?”

Ren turned around, thinking Fuwa sounded a bit strange. But by the time Ren saw him, Fuwa was already walking away towards the door.

After a short while, Fuwa came back to their room with coffee and sandwiches for Ren, and motion sickness medicine and a glass of water for Kazutaka.

“Ren, let me know when the case opens.”

Having said that, Fuwa left hurriedly.

Watching Fuwa's back, Ren felt that Fuwa had something on his mind. Then Kazutaka asked a question with his eyes closed.

“You are used to handling machines, aren’t you, Ren? Do you think you can operate any kind of machine?”

“Not just any kind, but I am able to figure out the structure or system of most types of machines if I have enough time. As for operating them, one can always learn from the machines.”

“I see. It’s like the machine tells you what they want you to do, huh?”

Ren nodded yes. Whenever he took an order for production or modification of equipment, Ren first touched the machines before getting started. He'd press his palms against the machines in order to determine what to do. Sometimes it was as if Ren could hear the machines telling him what needed to be done. It could be “Oil the cylinder for me,” or “I’m having a hard time getting the reflective plate to the right angle.”

Ren’s father had been the same way. He could also hear the voices of the machines. In the middle of the night, Ren’s father would suddenly mutter, “Aha. I've got it. That’s what you wanted me to do.” Then his father would go to the factory, open the machine up and say, “Look, Ren. We just needed to do it this way.” Although his father wasn’t smiling when he'd say it, he must have felt happy as the machines had told him what was needed. There was a gardener

who lived two doors down from Ren's house. That man would sometimes say a similar thing. He said that the trees told him what to do.

It may be a strange analogy, but relationships are like that. We should not rely solely on ourselves when deciding what to do. Listening to your partner is a good place to start.

"I think I understand. My job is similar. I listen to the children and try to understand what is actually being said by reading between the lines. That's important, right?"

"Do you like kids, Kazutaka?"

"I do."

"But there must be some kids that you don't like."

Kazutaka chuckled wryly. His smile conveyed comfort. His smile was like porridge to food, ball bearings to machines, or cushions to interior decoration. It was something to mitigate the harshness and ease tension. In other words, Kazutaka was like a buffer.

"You provide an oasis of calm, I think."

"To you, Ren?"

"To children, I mean," Ren quickly corrected him because Kazutaka was right, but Ren couldn't bring himself to admit it. Ren was a thieves' accomplice to Kazutaka. This was definitely not the right time to confess "You are an oasis for me."

On late winter afternoons, occasionally there was an unusually warm day when the sun shone through the windows. On those days, Ren would feel spring nearing. Kazutaka's presence brought a similar warmth. Not the blasting heat of a central heating system, but more like the warmth from a small, comforting, crackling log fire. Ren found himself saying, "I live alone."

Ren couldn't believe what he had just said and felt embarrassed.

"I live alone, too. I buy Cup-o-Noodles soup by the case at a discount store."

"Same here."

The two chuckled at the same time.

“One time I poured hot water into the noodle soup and forgot about it. Later on, the noodles were so swollen that I couldn’t even put the lid back on. It was soggy and cold. I heated it up anyway and ate it after all. It was disgusting.”

“If you had had a partner then that might have been fun.”

If one said, “This is disgusting,” the other would say, “Let me taste it.” They could eat it together and laugh about how horrible it was.

“Single life is lonesome.”

“Shall we become partners so we won’t be lonely?”

Kazutaka opened his eyes wide and stared at Ren intently. Then he replied in a low voice, “That’s an idea.” Ren had been certain of rejection. Kazutaka’s reaction was completely unexpected. Ren thought of the phrase “living together,” but had no idea what it was really like. Ren wasn’t good at imagining things. Ren tried to picture Kazutaka sitting on one of the chairs in his factory, but he couldn’t. Just as Ren gave up trying, Kazutaka whispered, “Maybe it’s not possible.”

Kazutaka closed his eyes again. He was apparently thinking along the same lines. They both thought it was impossible after all. Ren was forlorn.

Ren finally succeeded in figuring out the frequency of the last lock.

“Here we go. This should do it.”

Ren went to get Fuwa. When they came back, Todo-san was with them as well.

“This is it, right?”

Ren nodded happily at Kazutaka’s remark.

Ren adjusted the frequency of the infrared wavelengths to match that of the lock and sent out the signal. With a series of clicks, the last one unlocked and the lid swung open with a dramatic sound. Apparently, the hinges had a very strong spring. Something fell out of the case and onto the bed. It was the key to the handcuffs, which had a fingerprint reading sensor. Since they didn’t have the

right fingerprint, Kazutaka would have to go home with the handcuffs still on his wrist.

Ren picked up the key and fiddled with it in chagrin. There was still no way for Ren to separate Kazutaka from the attaché case because the one cuff was welded to the case itself. Ren clearly wanted to free Kazutaka's left hand badly. The main purpose was to get the contents out of the case, but Ren wanted to remove the handcuffs, too. It would make things so much easier for Kazutaka to not to have anything attached to him. Although Ren knew the key to the handcuffs had a fingerprint sensor, he had thought he could figure out something once he had the key. Ren held the handcuff key for a long time.

The attaché case, on the other hand, looked pretty much the same. It was just the way it had been when Kazutaka first saw it. There was a depression in the middle of the case where a large shiny black bag was secured by packing foam. Something inside clanged heavily when Fuwa picked up the bag. When he opened the bag, there was an ornament studded with dazzling blue gemstones. Whether it was real or fake almost didn't matter. It was utterly beautiful.

"Please, Todo-san."

Todo-san nodded and put a pair of appraiser's glasses on. He examined the jewelry very carefully. Then he checked the gemstones further under a microscope.

"This is zirconia, I think. Very skillfully made, but it's fake. Worth about two hundred thousand yen at most. This is definitely not the Teardrop of the Nile."

Fuwa had half expected this result but still couldn't conceal his disappointment.

"Oh, just as we suspected. I'll call Bud then." Fuwa sighed and left the room.

There was no reason for Kazutaka to sympathize with Fuwa, but he couldn't help feeling sorry for him. Kazutaka could tell that Fuwa and his team were very talented thieves. When thieves at their level of competence ended up with fake goods in their hands, how must that make them feel? It was hard for Kazutaka to imagine, but thieves or not, Kazutaka didn't like to see people hurt or disappointed.

Todo spread the replica of Teardrop of the Nile over the table and stared at it.

“This is extremely well made. The replication of the stones is excellent. You can’t tell the difference from the real thing just by looking. This couldn’t have been made quickly. I’d say this had to have been prepared in advance.”

“What do you mean that the replica had been already prepared, Todo-san?”

“Well, Shīno must have anticipated that the Teardrop of the Nile would be brought to market and had this realistic replica made in preparation. When the real Teardrop of the Nile was being exhibited at the Smithsonian, Shīno was probably already hoping that someone would bring it to him someday. He may have even had a particular buyer in mind.”

Some thieves are closely watched by Interpol, which makes it difficult for them to move loot abroad. Moving stolen goods beyond international borders is normally done by professional transporters. Transporters check out jewelers around the world to recruit potential agents because it’s only natural for jewelers to carry gemstones.

Shīno must have received the Teardrop of the Nile from one of those transporters. His assignment as an agent might have been to take it to the next checkpoint, Todo explained.

“Where is Shīno taking the authentic piece then?”

“Probably to another jeweler. Whether domestic or overseas, I don’t know.”

“So, I was just a decoy, huh?”

“Bad luck for you, Kazutaka-san. I apologize on behalf of the chief. If I was too rough on you, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about that now. I’m okay. Fuwa-san looked so very aghast. I’m more worried about him. Are you going to work with Fuwa-san again, Todo-san? You know, go for revenge?”

“I don’t know yet. The chief had told us that we were going to disband after this. Bud would like to try one more time, though. It all depends on what they decide. I’ll be in if the chief decides to do it.”

“The other members too? Will all of you get together?”

“Would you like to join as a volunteer, Kazutaka-san?”

Kazutaka laughed about Todo-san’s proposal. He actually thought it might be fun. When he was first kidnapped, they were just thieves who were giving him misery, but they'd grown on Kazutaka over the past three days.

“I don’t have any special talent. I’d just get in your way, I’m afraid. Todo-san, what’s your normal specialty?”

“My main occupation is as a jewel polisher.”

Fuwa had valued Todo’s sharp eyes and asked him to come aboard. Todo was a jewel polisher with artisan skills. Toshi, who'd driven the R.V. yesterday, was in the transportation business. He was a driver in his regular life, too. Ken, who'd stood watch on Shīno, was a maritime radio operator. He worked as a crew member on big excursion cruise ships. It had been Ken’s idea to travel by ferry.

Although not involved on this job, there were other members of Fuwa’s team, including a chef, an architect, and so forth. But actually Ren was not a regular member. Ren had manufactured custom machines for Fuwa twice, worked as a driver once, and then there was this time. Only four times total.

They put the fake Teardrop of the Nile back into the sack, and then stuffed the sack into the attaché case. After all this, Kazutaka was going to take it back to Shīno Jewelry as that was what Bud had instructed them to do when Fuwa contacted him.

“When the ferry arrives at northern Kyushu, the team will be dismissed. I’ll stay there in order to discuss matters with Bud. But Todo-san and Toshi-kun, you'll take the Shinkansen bullet train together. Kazutaka-san and Ren, you'll fly back together, okay? Thank you.”

Fuwa thanked everyone and offered a sincere apology to Kazutaka who had a feeling that Ren might secretly have a crush on Fuwa. If Ren did, Kazutaka could see why.

“Are you disappointed to find that you were carrying a replica around?”

Kazutaka shook his head to Ren’s question.

“I’m not disappointed. I’m just wondering why Shīno made me do it.”

“When you go back, you should really tell him not to get you involved in anything like this again.”

“I have a hard time saying no when someone asks for a favor.”

“You are such a sucker.”

“Look who’s talking. I was there when Fuwa-san called you. You quickly accepted his request and practically flew right over here.”

“It’s because it was Yuri. I’m not a sucker. I’m particular.”

Kazutaka nodded.

“You like Fuwa-san, don’t you?”

“I like him just like many other people like him.”

“Just like many other people? How so?”

“It’s important for me that Yuri is happy. It’s great if lots of people like him. I feel content to be one of his admirers.”

Kazutaka thought to himself that he and Ren thought a lot alike.

We need to know what really matters. Our own happiness is certainly important, but the happiness of someone you love must be equally, if not more important. Kazutaka wasn’t comfortable if the relationship was one-sided and he felt the same way about his work as well. He highly valued the feelings and happiness of the students. If he could find hopes for their future and lives, and if he could smile with them, Kazutaka felt happy. Human beings were meant to be sympathetic, Kazutaka believed. Therefore, Kazutaka understood where Ren was coming from. He found himself thinking aloud.

“You're a nice guy, Ren.”

Ren looked surprised. “I’m not nice. I’m just reserved.”

“That, too, I guess. But it’s more than that. You're very considerate, Ren.”

“Stop it. Don’t flatter me. You won’t get anything in return.”

“All right, all right.”

Kazutaka smiled, which triggered Ren’s laughter. They both realized their

hearts had become close. It was much closer than either of them suspected though.

“Does your wrist hurt?”

“It’s not bad.”

“Let me wrap it up with some bandages. Stainless steel handcuffs must be rough on your skin and bones. The bandages will provide a little cushion when you are pulled by its weight.”

Kazutaka nodded and said, “Thank you.” Ren left the room to get some bandages from the kiosk. Apparently, Ren didn’t think Kazutaka required watching any more. He left the room key on the table in front of Kazutaka.

Ren put away his equipment and tools. He decided to spend the rest of his time on board preparing clothes for Kazutaka. Fuwa provided a casual lightweight windbreaker. Ren bought a sewing kit at the kiosk, came up with a design, and started cutting and sewing.

Kazutaka was busy thinking about his class.

“Can I call my students, Ren?”

Ren told him to go ahead and placed the cell phone on the bed. Kazutaka started dialing and suddenly stopped.

“Not enough battery. I guess I can’t call them all. Umm... I want to check on Mika, at least. Or maybe I should just concentrate on returning the missed calls.”

Kazutaka tried to make a decision about to who he should call given the limited battery life left. He hesitated for quite some time.

Ren didn’t say a word. He watched Kazutaka thinking and rethinking.

“Let’s see. ‘I have a cold. Don’t come see me because I don’t want you to catch it from me. I’ll see you when I get better. Kazutaka.’ That should do.”

Kazutaka talks to himself often. I remember some book said that those who talk to themselves tend to get lonely easily. That doesn’t apply to everyone, but there is some truth to it. People who feel lonely may be more sensitive to other

people's needs.

After sending the message, Kazutaka lay back down onto the bed.

"Are you going to sleep?"

"No. But I'm still feeling nauseous when I'm sitting up."

"You haven't gotten over your seasickness, huh?"

"I'll be okay. It's not as bad. Maybe I'm getting used to this."

It didn't look like Kazutaka was used to it at all. He was still pale and his movements were slow. Ren worried that Kazutaka would remain ill until getting off the ferry.

On the other hand, it was nice sewing as he watched Kazutaka sleeping beside him.

Ren loved working. He was happy as long as he had something to do, be it operating, tuning, or repairing machines at the factory, cooking, sewing, or gardening. Ren had been doing household chores since childhood. He wasn't sexist regarding labor either. He found a job around himself that needed doing, such as mopping the floor or doing the laundry, and got on with it.

Conversely, Ren couldn't just spend time puttering around or not doing anything. That was why his factory was open seven days a week. With or without Ōkuni-kun, Ren bustled about the factory. If Ren wasn't operating the machines, he was busy doing maintenance on them.

So Ren thought nothing of sewing clothes for Kazutaka. He didn't mind doing the task at all. By around 5:00 p.m., Kazutaka's cape was 90 percent done. Ken called to inform them that Shīno was on the move.

"Ken tells me Shīno's in casual wear but looks like he's going out somewhere," Fuwa said as he walked into Ren's room with a cell phone pressed against his ear.

"Where would he be going? Narita Airport, possibly? No way, huh? I told him to bring three hundred million yen to Narita at one in the afternoon."

"You didn't say that to Shīno, did you, Ren? You're bad."

Ren explained the series of phone calls they'd made that morning. Fuwa burst into laughter.

“Shīno will never bring the ransom money. But I think a little threat like that should teach him a lesson after what he’s done to an innocent middle school teacher. No more threats, though, Ren. We don’t know where Shīno is heading, but we can’t afford to reveal our location. It could put Kazutaka-san in a dangerous spot.”

Fuwa tapped on Ren’s chest, still laughing. Ren tilted his head and put his hand on his chest.

Huh? My heart didn’t start jumping.

Ren’s heart used to give a small jump and begin to ache whenever Fuwa touched him, triggering memories of their time together. When Fuwa touched him so casually today, Ren was unfazed. He mentally shrugged. Perhaps he'd gotten too old for that. Ren went back to finishing up Kazutaka’s cape. Ken called Fuwa again.

“He may be going abroad? Okay, got it. He’s in Hakozaki now? All right. Thank you.”

Once he'd hung up, Fuwa shook Kazutaka gently. “Kazutaka-san, could you get up now?”

Kazutaka didn’t respond. Although he'd said that he wasn’t going to sleep, Kazutaka was in dreamland.

If Shīno went overseas, they'd be unable to remove the handcuffs. Fuwa needed Kazutaka to wake up in order to stop Shīno from leaving, but Kazutaka didn’t open his eyes.

“What should we do? With his hand chained to an attaché case, it’ll be difficult for Kazutaka-san to get back to his daily life.”

“Yeah, he’ll have trouble just taking a bath or even eating.”

“Moreover, he won’t even be able to change his clothes. Unless he cuts them up, he won’t be able to take them off or put them on.”

“What was Shīno thinking anyway? He knows Kazutaka can’t live with

handcuffs on. Shīno asked him to transport the jewelry and then used him as a decoy. And now he's going abroad, leaving Kazutaka helpless? That's outrageous."

"Do you think one of the machines at your factory could cut through the chain?"

At Fuwa's question, Ren paused in his sewing.

"You want me to take this guy to my factory, Yuri? What if he turns me in to the police?"

"He won't do that."

Fuwa smiled as he tucked Kazutaka in bed.

"There's a good reason why he won't turn you in."

"What is it?"

"Don't you know?"

"What is that?"

"Never mind. If you don't know, that's okay. Let's go eat something while he's asleep, Ren."

"Kazutaka might wake up and need to go to the bathroom. I'll have to help him when that happens. So I can't go to the restaurant because I've got to stay here, Yuri"

"See? That's what I'm talking about," Fuwa said with a shrug and smiled mischievously. Then Yuri picked up Kazutaka's cell phone and walked to the window.

"What kind of relationship do you think he has with Shīno, Ren?"

Ren mumbled, "He said they were friends."

"Don't you think this is strange? Shīno doesn't seem to that think they're friends. Ken checked Shīno's phone but didn't find Kazutaka Yui among the saved numbers or on the speed dial."

"Is that so?"

“Kazutaka-san doesn’t have Shīno Jewelry among the contacts on his cell phone, either. It certainly doesn’t look like they are good friends. It may be more like...Shīno's maybe got something on Kazutaka-san. And that’s why Kazutaka-san can’t say no when Shīno asks for a favor.”

Fuwa put the cell phone down on the table and gracefully crossed his arms as he stood at the window with his back towards Ren.

“He appears childlike and he is biddable and pure. He has never sulked or given any indication that he was upset since we kidnapped him.”

“No, he hasn’t.”

Kazutaka simply believed that he would be released when the time came and remained patient. He never suspected that anything was wrong. Kazutaka was very agreeable and made people feel relaxed and comfortable.

“There have been a few cases in the past when we got civilians involved, but we released them in the matter of an hour or so. Those people were never as calm and cheerful as Kazutaka-san. They normally got mad or cursed at us. They threatened to take matters to court. That’s why we never showed ourselves or took their blindfolds off.”

“That’s right.”

“But this guy was calm. The minute he was brought into the R.V., he let me talk. When I told him that we wouldn’t harm him, he immediately became submissive and quiet.”

Ren had to agree with Yuri. Although Kazutaka had protested loudly when Ren tried to open his fly in the bathroom, it wasn’t Kazutaka’s fault. Ren had been too hasty and acted without warning.

“I meet all kinds of people because of what I do, but I’ve never met anyone so obedient.”

Fuwa’s regular job was as a hotel concierge. He was used to the unreasonable demands people made.

“What are you trying to say, Yuri?”

“I think you and Kazutaka-san could become friends.”

“You think so?”

Ren didn’t argue because Fuwa was almost always right. “Since the Teardrop of the Nile was a replica, the deal’s off this time, right? What is Bud planning to do now?”

“He would like to give it another shot.” Fuwa turned around and inclined his head slightly, smiling weakly. “That’s what Bud said when I called him. I told him to find someone else for the next job. That's when Bud got really mad.”

“Why?”

“He said, ‘I thought we understood each other. I thought you were taking part because it was for a good cause. Why can’t you stay with me until the end?’ That was his argument. I understand our cause and all, but I have my own plans, too. So, I told him that we should end it.”

“End it? What do you mean, Yuri?”

“What else can it mean? We're breaking up.”

Fuwa approached Ren with a gentle smile.

“That’s that. I’ll see you later.”

When Fuwa said “That’s that,” Ren didn’t quite know what Fuwa meant but nodded.

Ren forgot about the sewing for a while after Fuwa left the room. Ren walked to the window where Fuwa had been standing and looked outside. Ren saw the sunset, the ocean and the sky, nothing else.

What had Fuwa been thinking as he stared out the window? Fuwa had decided to break up with his boyfriend, all because Bud wouldn’t stop this crazy and risky business. Yet, Ren didn’t come out and say, “I’m right here for you.” He couldn't bring himself to say that.

Yuri probably knows why, Ren guessed.

Ren turned back to Kazutaka, who was still sleeping quietly on the bed. Ren started thinking about the possibility. Not the possibility of resuming a relationship with an ideal lover like Yuri Fuwa, but the possibility for starting a new relationship with Kazutaka Yui.

It wouldn't be the same as with Fuwa. We won't be sharing a sweetly mellow relationship. But it could be enjoyable in its own right.

Ren decided to strike up a conversation when Kazutaka woke up.

Ren was not good at talking and couldn't possibly lead the conversation. Kazutaka was a school teacher so surely he must be used to talking.

I'd love to hear him yell, "That section will be on the exam!" one more time, Ren thought hopefully. He sat down on the edge of the bed and stroked Kazutaka's head softly.

Kazutaka's hair was soft and silky, like a child's hair. It felt nice and smooth to the touch.

Ren completed his final task just as they were about to reach port. Ren tied the attaché case closed with a strong elastic belt. He added a handle so that it'd be easier for Kazutaka to carry around. Previously, the attaché case was kept connected to the carrier's left hand only by the handcuffs, but the chain was rather short and there was no other handle. The carrier had to hold the case to his chest, supporting the top with his left hand and the bottom with his right. It was very inconvenient.

There was, however, a reason for this design. It was designed with the premise that the courier might be attacked by a gunman. The courier was forced to hold the case over his chest so that it would protect him from bullets. In other words, the case was for carrying goods of extreme importance and value. If it had been made in Japan, the design would have been different. The chain would have been at least 12 inches long and there would have been a handle for the handcuffed hand to hold.

"Are you ready? We're moving back to our R.V."

On Fuwa's cue, the four of them started walking through the hallway.

"Ren, can you drive?"

"Yeah."

Ren got into the driver seat while the other three men climbed into the back. They waited for the ferry to reach the dock.

At 1:30 pm. Wednesday, the ferry arrived at northern Kyushu. They drove off the ferry as directed by an attendant. Then they drove for about ten minutes to reach the hotel where they were to meet up with Bud West and Toshi. The six of them would then be divided into three pairs. Two pairs were going back home, and one pair was planning a three-day trip.

But their plans were changed within five minutes of checkin at the hotel. Bud wasn't there. Toshi explained the situation.

"Yesterday afternoon, there was a post on the message board on the Internet jewelry site. It said that the Teardrop of the Nile was currently being transported somewhere in Japan. Bud suspected that there might be multiple theft rings looking for it. Bud also suspected that it was Shīno who wrote the post, because Shīno went out in casual attire shortly after the post was uploaded. He was headed for Hong Kong, so Bud flew out to Hong Kong on the first flight this morning. If Shīno has the real Teardrop of the Nile, Bud can figure out where it was sold. Once Bud uploads the news of this transaction over the Internet, everyone would know that the one inside Japan was merely a replica."

"We're in trouble," Fuwa said with a serious look and his arms crossed.

The information network among theft rings was extremely intense. One tiny message board post had over 10,000 hits in half a day. Whether or not the Teardrop of the Nile was actually being transported was beside the point. Some thieves were very likely to jump into action anyway.

"In this new light, it could be dangerous to let Kazutaka-san go home."

The Teardrop of the Nile was like a thieves' dream. Every thief would want to get their hands on it. If the thief was conscientious enough, they might not take the ornament apart to remove the tanzanites. They would sell it as a whole. The buyer would have to be a trustworthy wealthy person or a rich dilettante.

The buyer would be able to tell no one about possessing the Teardrop of the Nile. The jewel would have to be stored in a home vault or in a high security safe deposit box at a bank. It would have to stay there quietly for several years, or several decades.

The only people who would be fortunate enough to view the ornament would be the wealthy buyer himself and a very few trusted people close to him. The

jewelry itself would be privately admired, well taken care of, and safely kept. Several years would pass by and the buyer would pass away. Then the jewelry would be secretly taken out of the safe and entrusted into someone else's custody. Museums are not the only place where valuable jewelry is kept under the strongest protection. When in the hands of an individual's, unlike at museums, most people don't get to see it. That's the main difference. Precious jewelry might wander around from one wealthy hand to another within a small circle for many decades, or many hundreds of years.

Over time, no one would remember who stole it or where it was obtained. Very rarely, the jewel leaves the individual's hand and is donated to a museum. But if the jewelry piece is a very important and expensive one, the one on exhibit is normally a replica. The real jewelry lies slumbering inside a vault. It doesn't matter who owns it. What's important is that it remains in its original form and is well taken care of and kept safe.

"What that means to professional thieves is that they know that prominent jewelry, such as the Teardrop of Nile, never fails to bring in a profit. It is destined to be targeted. Kazutaka-san is not a professional jewelry dealer. He's not a professional thief, either. He's only an amateur. When an amateur carries around such desirable jewelry, he's an easy target. It's a great opportunity for them to get their hands on the piece. That's what they'll think."

"But this one is fake, isn't it?"

"Yes, but nobody will believe your word alone. They'll have to hold it in their hands, have it appraised, and only then will they genuinely know they are just zirconias. We didn't know until we checked it out, right? Other thieves are the same. They hold onto the hope that what they steal may be the real one, Kazutaka-san."

"How do I convince them that this is merely a counterfeit?"

"There is no sure way. Since we are not after a profit, we promised you your safety. But some thieves are rather rough. Who knows what they'll do to you when they catch you? If you board a plane with that attaché case, you probably won't even make it to Hamamatsu-chō."

"That would be terrible," Ren suddenly interjected.

Kazutaka's eyes bugged out in surprise.

"Ah, um. I think it's our responsibility to return Kazutaka safely to his regular life. There are children who need him."

"What is your plan for avoiding detection, Ren?"

"We'll take Kazutaka back to Tokyo safely hidden in the R.V. I can remove the handcuffs at my factory and send him home."

"Todo-san and Toshi-kun have to go back to work tomorrow. Today is their last day off. We don't have time to drive to Tokyo."

"I'll drive myself, then. If I leave now and drive all night, we'll be in Tokyo by noon tomorrow. What do you think?"

Toshi shook his head, disagreeing with Ren's proposition.

"It's true that you'll make it back in 24 hours, but you can't drive the whole time. You'll need at least one backup driver."

"Can you do it, Yuri?"

"My license is not for oversized vehicles. I could drive it as long as the road is straight, I guess. But I don't feel comfortable driving such a large vehicle."

They were all caught up in their own thoughts, humming and hawing while turning it over in their minds.

"Todo-san and Toshi-kun, you really don't have much time left. You should get going right now. I'll try to come up with a way to send Kazutaka-san home safely somehow."

Todo and Toshi stood up, still looking worried, but they really did to have to get going. They couldn't stay forever.

"Why don't you post, telling people that the previous message about the Teardrop of the Nile traveling in Japan was a false rumor?"

"Bud has already done that. I'm afraid that may make people even more suspicious, though. You know, they may think that the person carrying the jewels wrote it in order to distract attention from himself."

Ren opened the browser on his cell phone, asking Fuwa the URL of the

message board.

The message board seemed to have true and false information all mixed up. But professional thieves had ways of telling well-founded information from mere rumor relatively easily. The post, presumably written by Shīno, sounded like it came from reliable source.

“Seeking witness: Tanzanite (estimated insurance value of twenty billion yen), that suddenly disappeared from Singapore, was found by a jeweler. The jewelry was stolen on the way to the authorities. It is rumored that the jewelry is currently being transported somewhere in Japan. I wonder if it’s true. :-D”

“Do you think Shīno told someone about the incident?”

Kazutaka was hopelessly trusting, Ren sighed.

“Kazutaka-san, I think Shīno wrote this himself in order to divert people’s attention away from himself.”

“Shīno did?”

“Some thieves are probably confused now, wondering which Teardrop is real, the one in Hong Kong or the one in Japan. They’ll start looking at the place near them. Some group will be able to trace the stones to Shīno Jewelry. But the store is open for business as usual, so then they'll try to figure out who stole the Teardrop of the Nile. They'll wonder if it was Shīno or someone else. They’ll try to figure out any suspicious moves that may have occurred during the transport. Then, they'll find out there was this friend of Shīno's involved, a middle school teacher who has helped him transport valuables several times in the past. This teacher has been missing since Monday. So, they’ll watch Kazutaka’s apartment. If he goes home, it’ll be like a moth flying into the flame. They'll kidnap Kazutaka before he has a chance to get inside. They’ll take him directly to their hide-out where torture or violence awaits.”

“Kazutaka, do you want to go to the police with this replica, requesting official protection?”

“No way. If the police conduct an investigation, I’ll eventually have to talk about you all.”

Fuwa glanced at Ren and smiled slightly.

Ren felt thrown off balance. He thought Fuwa must have sensed something from Kazutaka's unwillingness to take the matters to the authorities. Ren needed to put whatever might be going on between Kazutaka and himself aside for now, though. Figuring out a way to return Kazutaka safely to where he belonged was his top priority. Fuwa spoke as if to conclude this discussion.

"Let's just wait until Bud uploads some new information from Hong Kong. He's a regular on this message board. He's also very famous on other valuable jewelry sites. When Bud writes something, it'll be deemed credible and things will calm down."

Fuwa then looked at Ren and smiled broadly.

"You can go now, Ren. I'll take care of Kazutaka-san."

Fuwa's trying to push my buttons by putting me on the spot, Ren thought. "Well, I..."

Both Kazutaka and Fuwa looked at Ren at the same time. Fuwa had a straight face on whereas Kazutaka had a desperate look. Ren knew he could not ditch him and simply go back to Tokyo alone once he saw Kazutaka's face.

"When it comes to a showdown, don't hesitate. Where there is a will, there is a way," Ren's father used to tell him.

Dad, there aren't so many crucial moments in our lives, Ren spoke to his father in his mind*. What Yuri does and how I get involved in the theft business aren't important. But I need to take Kazutaka home safely. Dad, I have to take this risk*.

Ren made up his mind, stood, and made a fist with his right hand.

"I'll stay with Kazutaka until the end of our road. Only when Kazutaka is home, free from all restrictions and danger, will my job be done."

Kazutaka looked serious, almost absorbed by something. He looked like a child, who had found something wonderful and stopped everything else to examine it. It was a very innocent look.

Kazutaka really was like a fawn, Ren thought. Ren decided to stand guard on the savannah and make sure no misfortune would strike the fawn. He was

determined to protect Kazutaka.

Fuwa read the mood and got up with a smile.

“If that’s the case, we’ll have to eat something before we go on our way, Ren.”

Fuwa walked over to the room’s phone. Ren noticed a little melancholic tilt to Fuwa’s shoulders, but he had already made up his mind. It was like finally getting closure and opening a new chapter for Ren.

Two hours later, Fuwa informed them that Bud had called from Hong Kong.

“Bud found Shīno. It doesn’t look like he has visited any appraisers yet. He’s at a restaurant with some local jewelers right now.”

“Is Shīno safe?”

“Probably.”

“How come Shīno is safe if I’m in danger?”

Fuwa answered with a smile.

“Shīno is actually well known in the underworld. He’s gutsy when dealing; he doesn’t mess around with the valuables brought in to him. Shīno only functions as a middleman. He may be shady, but shady people trust him. Do you understand that?”

Kazutaka thought of Shīno’s nervous look. Gutsy wasn’t an adjective he would have used in describing Shīno.

“Shīno used to be nervous and sensitive when we were high school students. He was just a normal guy.”

“Maybe Shīno has a dual personality. While he was in college, Shīno flew all over the world in place of his father. I contacted him one time then. Shīno has such a poker face that he never reveals his real character or what goes on behind the curtain to anybody. The clerks at his store probably don’t know Shīno’s true nature.”

Kazutaka remembered how Shīno didn’t trust his clerks. He had felt sorry thinking it had to be so hard for Shīno to be in a line of business when he

couldn’t even trust his own clerks. But the lack of trust perhaps stemmed from his own dubious set of values. When you're in a dirty business, you become suspicious. Kazutaka was getting a vague picture of the real Shīno.

“I thought Shīno was working diligently at his store.”

“Oh, he is diligent. Shīno doesn’t alter predetermined routes or embezzle merchandise that is brought in to him. Nobody would ever entrust anything to him otherwise and Shīno would lose all those handsome commissions. He assists in the resale of jewelry on a steady basis. Shīno also studies hard and pays close attention to horizontal connections. Even when he’s appraising obviously stolen goods, Shīno doesn’t say anything unnecessary.”

According to Fuwa, how Shīno used Kazutaka might be worthy of high praise from among his potential clients. By asking Kazutaka to deliver a fake Teardrop of the Nile to the police, Shīno had protected the real piece. At least, that’s what those people might think.

“Fuwa-san, you completely wasted your time on the replica.”

“It’s okay. I wasn’t all that excited about this job anyway.”

“You said that you were not after the profit, right? Fuwa-san, what were you going to do with the Teardrop of the Nile if you got the real one?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.”

Ren has been fidgeting with the sensor key for the handcuffs. He stopped mid motion to look toward Kazutaka. It seemed as if Ren wanted to say something, but he didn’t open his mouth.

“We're engaged in a certain project. Bud is at the backbone of it. We’ve been purchasing heroin and cocaine coming from abroad. We then dispose of the drugs before they reach our shores.”

“Wow. I thought that done by the police.”

It wasn’t the kind of thing people usually talked about over coffee after a meal.

“Who is Bud anyway?”

“He teaches at an English conversation school near the train station. Privately, he's also a struggling sculptor but his family is super rich.”

“That is only on the surface, right? What kind of person is he really?”

“He operates a sort of NPO as an activist. Blocking the influx of drugs on the waterfront was its objective.”

To Kazutaka, such stories existed only in the news. He had occasionally heard that investigators had confiscated a huge shipment of drugs at a port, and that the drugs were estimated to be worth millions of yen. But all that didn’t seem real to Kazutaka.

“But this time, it wasn’t about the drugs. Bud was taking a big chance and putting himself into an even more dangerous situation. He was planning on going home to succeed his family business if all went well. Bud wanted to make a big last score.”

Kazutaka noticed Ren was frowning. Assuming that Ren looked so serious because he cared so much about Fuwa made Kazutaka feel uneasy.

“What do you mean by ‘a big chance’?”

“I can’t give you much detail, but a government affiliated organization built some storage facility on a small island between Kyushu and Okinawa nearly a year ago. Officially, it’s a facility for conducting seismic observations as well as being a communications link. The organization paid almost ten times as much as normal to the company that did the underground construction work. They built a huge reinforced concrete structure 30 to 100 feet below ground level. What do you think that was?”

“An amusement park?”

Fuwa smiled brightly and patted Kazutaka’s head softly.

“It was a storage shelter for arms and munitions, a sort of depot.”

Hearing this, Ren interrupted. “Yuri, this is all news to me. I thought you were simply generating funds to stop the influx of drugs as usual.”

“Bud and I didn’t tell anyone else except for the team members who were to be directly involved in the execution of the mission to destroy the facility. We

were planning to obtain a ship and some explosives, and then go to the island to destroy the shelter."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Of course, it is. But Japan should not have allowed a secret agency to build such a thing on that island. We were worried about exactly what might be stored underground on a remote island. So, we visited the island to check out the shelter. There was nothing there yet. And since it's not an official government building, they don't have guards posted or anything. That's why we decided to secretly destroy it."

Fuwa also told them that they already had a demolition expert in their group, who had been standing by in Okinawa. Since they couldn't generate the funds, the plan was being called off and the expert had gone home.

"Is this what Bud and you had a disagreement over, Yuri?"

"Not just a disagreement. I think it's over between us. We're breaking up."

"I'm with you, Yuri. If I had known the true objective was the bombing of a building, I wouldn't have assisted you."

Yuri gave a sad smile.

"Bud claimed that he's going to destroy the facility no matter what it takes. We talked it over for a long time. I tried hard to dissuade him, but he wouldn't change his mind. So I decided to break up my unit, even while knowing it's probably the end of our relationship. Bud must be furious about it. He's probably wandering around Hong Kong with steam coming out of his ears. I thought we were contributing to Japan's public safety by disposing of illegal drugs. But I also understand where Bud is coming from. Having an unofficial weapons hangar, built with government funds, is a far more dangerous thing."

"What are they trying to keep in that storage area?"

"Bud thinks it's missiles. They must be thinking about importing them. All top secret, for sure. According to Bud, the first shipment could come within a year. It's easier and safer to destroy the facility now because it's still empty. But once they receive the armaments and have guards posted, we won't be able to approach."

Kazutaka felt sort of lost, listening to Fuwa and Ren talk like this. Kazutaka wasn't appalled by Bud's idea, but it seemed outlandish to him. It wasn't the kind of talk an ordinary school teacher should be listening to. Talking about the Teardrop of the Nile was already way too much for Kazutaka to deal with and now they were talking about secret government agencies creating a weapons hangar while planning to procure a bunch of missiles in utmost secrecy.

"Were you reluctant to take part in the operation, Fuwa-san?"

"I was. Although I understand Bud's ideas and principles, it's just too much for me. Our plan fell through this time because the Teardrop of the Nile was a replica. But there's no next time for me."

If Bud is worried about a weapon depot on a remote island, he could spread the word through the mass media or on the Internet. We don't live in a world where an individual can just go vigilante to prevent sophisticated weapons from coming in. Using explosives to destroy a dangerous facility might be heroic, but it's also extremely reckless. It's information that moves the world nowadays. Not weapons, Kazutaka thought.

"Can't you stop Bud, Fuwa-san?"

"He won't listen to me."

Hearing the resigned tone in Fuwa's voice saddened Kazutaka.

Bud may be an idealist but he's also foolhardy. Kazutaka admired Bud's bold ideas but it was all way over his head. Kazutaka thought of an ant climbing on the back of a whale. The ant would never know what it was climbing. Kazutaka felt like that ant.

"I didn't mean to be a downer. Let's not talk about this anymore."

"Ah, that's okay. I was just overwhelmed by the scale of his plan, that's all. By the way, no matter what his intentions may be, it would be considered espionage, wouldn't it? How does Bud feel about that?"

"The explosive charge would only be damaging property. Bud doesn't think that's a big deal. To him, it's like a game or something."

Kazutaka felt a little foolish. What Kazutaka had been going through was an

ordeal. Yet it was all just a game to Bud, who was a struggling sculptor, posing as an English teacher. Kazutaka resented the fact that Bud had used him as a pawn.

Even though it was only a small class, Kazutaka was in charge of children. He paved the road little by little for his students to walk over. It's a small road, but Kazutaka would never give up on it as long as there were children who needed his help.

Bud didn't care about such mundane concerns. Shīno didn't care, either. They didn't even pay attention to people like Kazutaka.

Ren and Fuwa were the only people who cared about Kazutaka and were concerned about his work. Ren was still examining the handcuff key, hoping to make it work.

"Fuwa-san, could you call Bud for me?"

"Um, why?"

"I'd like to speak to him. I need someone to interpret because I don't speak English."

"He doesn't speak Japanese but he understands it. What do you want to tell him, Kazutaka-san?"

"I'll tell him directly. I know it's hard for you to call him now, but I really need to talk to him."

Fuwa stared at Kazutaka and then took out his cell phone. With each number that Fuwa pressed, Kazutaka felt more and more nervous. Kazutaka had only met Bud for a minute. Bud also wasn't Japanese. Kazutaka wasn't sure if he could get across to Bud what he wanted to say. He might not be able to express it well, but Kazutaka had to get it off his chest.

Fuwa held the cell phone to his ear and then nodded to Kazutaka.

"Here, it's ringing. He'll pick up."

Kazutaka took the cell phone and waited. The ringing stopped and Kazutaka heard a voice filled with irritation saying, "Hi."

"Bud? This is Kazutaka. We met inside the R.V. I was the one carrying the jewelry."

Bud started laughing and said something in English Kazutaka couldn’t catch.

“Sorry, but I don’t understand what you're saying. I don’t speak English. I don’t understand English when it’s spoken, either. So I’m going to tell you what I need to say. Please don’t hang up. I need you to listen to me.”

Ren, with a serious look on his face, was gazing at Kazutaka. Ren had his mouth set in a straight line and was watching with a grim stare.

“Bud, I won’t tell anyone about what happened. The fact that I was kidnapped, the fact you were planning to sell the jewelry, and the fact you were going to destroy a government facility with the funds generated from the jewelry sale... I’ll take all that to my grave.”

After a short silence, Kazutaka heard him say, “Thanks.” “I want you to make up for your actions. You know, make amends. Do you understand?”

“Yes, but for what?”

“You don’t need to give me anything. I don’t need words or money. I just need action, Bud. I would like you to visit my class and meet my students. I’m not asking you to teach them English. I’ve been absent for a few days because of this ordeal. I would like you to spend the same amount of time with my students. They needed me, so I would like to make up for the lost time that we would have shared together. Please. Come see the children, give the lost hours back to them.”

Bud didn’t reply right away. Maybe he didn’t quite understand what Kazutaka was trying to say. “I’ll hand the phone back to Fuwa-san. You can give him your answer.”

Kazutaka returned the phone to Fuwa who exchanged a few words with Bud and then winked at Kazutaka.

“Bud wants to know the number of children in your class.”

“Fifteen.”

Fuwa relayed Kazutaka’s reply to Bud. Shortly after that, a slow smile spread across Fuwa's face. He ended the call, approached Kazutaka, and hugged him. “Thank you, Kazutaka-san.”

Fuwa got slightly teary as he continued, “Bud said that he was coming back just as soon as he could. He will visit your workplace for the number of days you have been held in captivity multiplied by the number of your students.”

“Huh? I was thinking more like just for a few days or so.”

“Don’t worry; let him help for a few months. That’s what he’s decided to do.”

“Oh.”

Fuwa then looked down shyly.

“I've also just decided...to talk things over with Bud when he comes back.”

“That’s great.”

“Thank you so much, Kazutaka-san. Bud is always so sure of himself that I didn’t think he’d listen to you. I didn’t think he’d apologize, either. I think Bud

must have sensed something from you.”

Bud might have thought that a teacher missing a few days of school wasn’t all that important. But to people like Kazutaka and his students, it meant the world. It seemed like Bud understood that much. Kazutaka was happy.

The room phone rang. Ren got up and answered the call.

“Hi. A package? All right. Thank you.”

It sounded like the call was from the front desk.

“Yuri, a package has arrived.”

“Ah, that must be the Kazutaka-san’s clothes. I ordered them earlier. I’ll go get it.”

“I can go for you.”

“There are three boxes, though.”

“You’re going overboard again. You’ve always been like that. When you like someone, you buy a bunch of clothes for them. You've got a habit of doing that, Yuri”

“Mind your own business, Ren.”

Ren chuckled and stood up, leaving the handcuff key on the table. Fuwa got up from his chair, then put his cell phone in his pocket and turned to Kazutaka.

“I guess I did get carried away a bit. I bought a lot of clothes for the hostage I love. I’ll go fetch them.”

“Um. Huh?”

Kazutaka was puzzled, since he thought Fuwa loved Bud. Kazutaka blinked in bewilderment. Fuwa laughed mischievously and gave him a slight wave as he and Ren left the room.

This was the second time Kazutaka had been left all alone since his captivity. He raised his free right hand and stretched.

Ren had wrapped Kazutaka’s left wrist on the ferry. With the heavy attaché case and handcuffs rubbing against it, his wrist had many scratches and scrapes. Ren had put the bandage on in silence, but Kazutaka appreciated Ren’s kindness.

Kazutaka picked up the sensor key for the handcuffs. He pressed the on switch. There was a tiny beep and the LCD display said “Locked.” Kazutaka pressed where it said “Enter,” and the display said “Open.” He pressed “Enter” again. Now the display began to flash “Error.”

“I suppose it really has to be Shīno.”

But Shīno was in Hong Kong. Now that the Teardrop of the Nile had been exposed as a fake, Shīno would no doubt return soon. Ren had said that he’d cut the chain at his factory, but Kazutaka still needed Shīno in order to remove the cuff from his wrist.

Kazutaka thought that his greatest weakness was that he was a pushover. He made up his mind to never cooperate with anything like this again, no matter what.

Kazutaka had agreed to help Shīno this time. Looking back, it would have been more natural for Shīno to carry the attaché case while Kazutaka held onto the key. Kazutaka felt responsible for making such a foolish commitment.

Kazutaka wondered what had gone through Shīno’s mind when he'd handcuffed Kazutaka. Shīno must have known that the attaché case was likely to get stolen, putting Kazutaka in danger. Yet he’d locked the handcuffs anyway. Kazutaka had ended up kidnapped but Shīno didn’t tell the police anything at all. The driver of the security company had kept his mouth shut as well.

Shīno had taken advantage of Kazutaka thinking that he wouldn't complain. Shīno had also known that Kazutaka wouldn’t get mad about it. Just as Shīno had guessed, Kazutaka wasn’t mad or anything. He only felt a great sadness that the trust and friendship he'd thought they shared was now gone.

Trust is not a tangible thing. One can’t see or touch it. It’s fragile and hard to grow, kind of like developing an adolescent. Kazutaka treasured both adolescents and trust.

The first thing Kazutaka tried to do with a new student was to build trust. He had to make sure the children were not intimidated or scared when Kazutaka was with them. “Don’t be scared” are mere words, which won’t help open their hearts. Opening their hearts is always the first step, one which would lead Kazutaka onto the long stairway of real trust. Kazutaka has to climb the stairs

one by one in order to build their sense of trust. Kazutaka's job was based on trust.

Kazutaka wondered if Shīno trusted him. Maybe Shīno had just used him. Kazutaka would have to wait until he got the chance to talk to Shīno face to face to find out the answer to that. As he placed the key back onto the table, the doorbell rang.

"Hello. Who is it?" Kazutaka answered.

"Terribly sorry to bother you, sir. It's room service."

It sounded like hotel personnel.

"I'm coming."

Kazutaka went to the door. He bent down to set the attaché case onto the floor and turned the knob with his right hand.

There were three men outside the room. They were wearing casual jackets, tight leather pants, and sunglasses. Not hotel uniforms.

"Oh? Didn't you say you were room service?"

Kazutaka screamed as one of the men abruptly yanked on the attaché case. Kazutaka was pulled along, pitched violently forward onto the floor.

"Whoa! What are you doing? Ouch! Stop it!"

One man pinned Kazutaka's arm under his foot, while another grabbed Kazutaka's hair and yanked.

"Where's the key?"

"The key is...on the table."

The third man ran inside and came back out with the sensor key.

"How do you open this?"

"You touch the screen and press 'Enter.'"

The man quickly touched the key.

"That will unlock this but you need the right fingerprint."

The man threw away the key.

“Let’s take him.”

One of them grasped the back of Kazutaka’s neck and forcefully pulled him up. Kazutaka’s feet barely touched the floor.

“Don’t scream if you want to live.”

Another man flashed a knife at him before putting it back into his pocket. He then pressed the pocket against Kazutaka as they started walking.

“Can you let go of my arm? I promise to come along with you.”

“Shut up.”

“The contents of the attaché case are a forgery.”

“We’ll determine that after we examine them.”

“We’ve already checked it out. It’s made of a type of artificial diamond called zirconia. It’s only worth about two hundred thousand yen.”

“Shut up and walk.”

“Can we go back to get the sensor key? It may work at an unexpected moment if we keep trying it. You never know.”

“Shut up. Do you wanna get hurt?”

“No, thank you.”

Kazutaka quieted down. Surrounded by the three men, he allowed himself to be herded towards the elevator.

This was Kazutaka's second abduction. Only, these men didn’t look as intelligent or gentle as Fuwa’s team. If Kazutaka got kidnapped now, he wouldn’t be there to have Bud visit his classroom, or wear the clothes Ren was bringing for him. More importantly, Kazutaka’s life seemed to be at stake!

Kazutaka got into the elevator, shoved in by the three men. Two women, who appeared to be tourists, were already inside the elevator. The two women frowned at the three suspicious-looking men and the nervous-acting Kazutaka.

Ladies, I’m not dodgy, Kazutaka wanted to assure them. But if he said anything, these women might also end up in danger. He resigned himself to his fate and looked down at the floor.

The elevator reached the lobby. The three men got out first, without even the courtesy of yielding to the ladies.

“Just walk naturally, don’t attract any unwanted attention. If you resist, you know what’s coming.”

The man puffed up the pocket of his leather jacket as he spoke. Kazutaka nodded in silence and started walking with the attaché case held tightly against his chest.

Ren stopped short in front of their room.

The sensor key was lying on the floor. Ren picked it up and cocked his head, wondering why it was on the floor outside of their room. The key had been on top of the table when Ren was with Fuwa and Kazutaka in the room.

The next moment, Ren rushed into the room.

“Kazutaka!” Ren called out, but there was no answer. He ran to the window and looked outside. There he saw a man surrounded by three other men making their way across the circular drive in front of the hotel.

“Kazutaka!”

The four were moving toward a dark colored van parked on the outer edge of the drive. Ren watched as Kazutaka was shoved roughly into the van, the three men climbing in after.

Ren opened the window without hesitation. He grabbed one of the chairs from in front of the table, leaned out and threw it at the car below from their third floor window. The chair arced down and hit the ground in front of the van. The van ran over the chair, sending shattered pieces of chair pieces flying. The driver became alarmed. He stopped the van and backed up a bit. Upon seeing this, Ren grabbed another chair.

“Aiyee!”

Ren threw it with everything he had. This time, the chair hit the windshield hard. The glass cracked and the windshield turned a milky white. The driver tried to remove the shattered glass with his fist while still sitting in the driver seat.

Ren dashed out of the room. Yuri also came running out of his.

“Ren, it’s Kazutaka-san!”

“I’ll get him!”

Ren ran through the hallway as fast as he could. He didn’t have time to wait for the elevator. Ren sprinted down the stairs, three steps at a time. He rushed through the lobby and ran outside.

Pieces of glass were piled on the other side of the drive. Beyond the pile, Ren saw a black van moving awkwardly away. Fuwa caught up with Ren.

“Ren, the car?”

Ren didn’t have time to answer; he was already running after the van. He got within 30 feet from the car at the first intersection, but the car turned right on a heading towards the downtown area.

Ren could think of only one thing. He had to get Kazutaka back. A car passed Ren, honking at him. Ren had run another 300 feet when the van had to stop for a traffic light. Ren ran by the car that had passed him earlier and rushed toward the black van. Ren was closing in on his target. The traffic light started blinking as an elderly woman started walking slowly across the crosswalk. Ren mentally thanked the old lady in the intersection as he ran around to the front of the van. It was a boxy vehicle and its front end was relatively high. Ren climbed onto the hood anyway.

“Argh!” the driver exclaimed.

“Drive, idiot. You can’t let him get in!” one of the other men shouted.

“Ren, Watch out!”

“Go, go, go!”

Everyone was shrieking simultaneously. Ren was now halfway through the windshield. Just then, the van suddenly accelerated with a loud screech.

“Oh, no!” The van hadn’t moved three feet before the driver jammed on the brakes. The vehicle drifted and the right rear crossed the center line. Another car coming from behind collided with the van. Wham! The impact knocked the van sideways. The van started again from that position. Ren impulsively looked back,

holding onto the hood with both hands. He saw trees, a power pole, and shrubs. With a muffled thud, the van ran into the shrubs at the edge of the sidewalk. Ren's left hand came loose from the momentum, threatening to throw him into the bushes. He barely managed to cling on with his right hand.

"Ren, be careful! Ren!"

Ren heard Kazutaka shout, which steeled his resolve. Ren used his right arm to try and pull himself all the way into the front seat. The van began to slowly back up. The car started moving through traffic again while Ren's feet were still sticking out onto the hood. Cars honked all around them.

One of the men yelled, "Get him out of the way!"

Immediately, another man grabbed Ren by his arm and shirt front, yanking him in. Ren sailed past the driver and front passenger seats, pulled all the way into the second row of the van.

"Oh, no! Ren!"

Ren heard Kazutaka's voice coming from above. Ren noticed that his head was now on Kazutaka's lap, which he thought was nice. Just then, Ren's legs were yanked hard. The sliding door opened noisily. Ren realized they were going to throw him out while the van was still moving. Ren heard a series of thuds and smacks as pain blossomed in his left shoulder and lower side. He saw soles belonging to black shoes. They were now kicking him. His assailants had to be panicked because they weren't connecting with full force.

"Stop it! Please! STOP!"

Kazutaka covered Ren with his own body.

"You stay right here!"

Kazutaka's body was pulled away from Ren. Kazutaka clung desperately to Ren's clothes. Ren felt the collar of his shirt tighten around his neck.

"What are you waiting for? Throw him out already!"

Ren couldn't tell how many arms were grabbing him or what those arms were holding. Ren's head inched closer to the sliding door. Ren felt a violent shove. The next thing he knew, his upper body was hanging out of the van. Ren

instinctively grabbed a seat belt, which sensed an impact and locked into position.

“Stop it! Ren’s going to fall! Hey, don’t do that! No!”

“You stop! Ugh! Stay still!”

Kazutaka’s screams and the attackers’ thundering voices were all mixed up together. Ren was pushed by his assailants and pulled back in by Kazutaka. Ren’s upper body was still outside the van, his face only a foot above the pavement. Someone relentlessly kicked at Ren’s hand holding the seat belt.

Ren was certain that he was about to fall only for the van to come to an abrupt stop. Everyone whipped around from the momentum. The kicking summarily stopped. Ren pulled himself up and turned around. He saw Kazutaka holding the attaché case high.

Bam! Kazutaka hit one of the men hard, who collapsed onto a seat. The other man, the one who had been kicking and punching Ren, was already folded over the seats in the third row. He appeared to possibly be suffering from a concussion.

“Ren, get out! Now!”

Kazutaka pushed Ren out so that they stumbled out of the van together, but it looked more like two men falling out. “Ouch! Yikes.”

Kazutaka held his wrist and grunted. Pulled down by the heavy weight of the attaché, Kazutaka must have landed badly; he was slow at getting up.

“Are you all right, Kazutaka?”

Ren slid his arms under Kazutaka’s armpits and helped him up. They started running, Ren still holding Kazutaka up. Although they thought they were running hard, it looked like slow motion because Ren was carrying the weight of Kazutaka and the heavy attaché case.

Kazutaka whispered through his grunts, “Where are we?”

For the first time, Ren noticed that they were on a bridge. That meant they couldn’t run into any side alleys. The only way was to move away from the van in a straight line. The attacker who had been knocked into the third row stepped

out of the van.

“How many of them were there, Kazutaka?”

“Four, I think.”

“You hit one of them, right? What about the driver?”

“I put the chain around his neck to strangle him and demanded that he stop the car.”

“Really?”

Ren kept on running with all his might, finally hearing the men shouting at them.

“Hey! Stop right there!”

It was the driver, the passenger, and the man from the back seat.

Kazutaka stopped and crouched down.

“I can’t run. Ren, you go on.”

“I can’t leave you behind, Kazutaka.”

“That guy has a knife, he’s dangerous.”

Ren looked around, thinking about possible strategies. They were on a bridge, which meant they had no way out. Their pursuers were hot on their heels; they would catch up eventually. A lot of cars were passing by, but no one was likely to stop for them, especially if someone was waving around a blade. Ren considered confronting them, but he knew Kazutaka couldn’t run on his own if Ren happened to get stabbed. “Can you swim, Kazutaka?”

“Yeah, I can.”

“You're not scared of deep water?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

Their pursuers were less than 100 feet away now.

The railing of the bridge appeared to be less than 35 feet above the water. Not that high. Once they dropped into the water, there was another 100 feet or more to the river bank. Ren had no idea how deep the river was. Since the bridge

was relatively low, the river might be rather shallow. If they hit the river bottom jumping down, the impact could kill them.

Ren picked up Kazutaka and swung him over the guardrail. Then Ren hopped over the bridge railing. The bridge had a ledge with an outside rail, almost like a balcony. It must have been built that way for aesthetic reasons. A strong wind was howling between the bars. The pursuers were now right behind them.

“Give it up already.”

The three men approached with slow menace, seeking to intimidate them. They looked frustrated and had their hands in their pockets. They didn’t think Kazutaka could get away.

“Kazutaka, let’s jump. I’ll go first. You follow me if it’s okay.”

“Jump from here?”

“I don’t know the depth of the water. If I don’t surface, don’t jump.”

“Wait, Ren. Let’s jump together.”

Kazutaka climbed over the outside railing, Ren supported the attaché case to help him. Seeing Kazutaka on the outside of the bridge, holding onto the railing, Ren placed the attaché case carefully at Kazutaka’s side. With the attaché case tucked between two bars, Kazutaka was forced into an uncomfortable position with his left shoulder hunched down. Ren climbed over the outer railing. The two of them looked at each other.

“I’m counting down from three.”

“Ren, thank you for everything.”

“Later. I’m counting now.”

“Ren, I have to tell you something. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Counting down. Three!”

One of the pursuers climbed over the railing. He laughed, seeing Ren and Kazutaka preparing to jump into the river below.

“Two!”

The man came closer to Kazutaka. A second man climbed over the railing,

joining the first.

“One!”

As Ren let go of the railing, he heard a loud bang but he didn’t have time to see what it was. Ren was already hitting the water feet first.

The water was plenty deep. Ren surfaced immediately and looked for Kazutaka who might be having difficulty in surfacing due to the weight of the heavy attaché case. Ren looked around for ripples and bubbles. Ren heard Kazutaka scream desperately from above.

“Ren!”

“What’s wrong, Kazutaka?”

“The case opened! It’s stuck in the railing, it won’t come loose!”

Ren looked up to see Kazutaka hanging from the bridge railing, with his left arm above his head. The attaché case had opened when Kazutaka had been about to jump and the case was now wedged in the railing.

“Kazutaka, where are they? The bad guys?”

As if in response to Ren’s question, three men poked their heads out above the railing. One of them was holding the glittering replica of the Teardrop of the Nile in his hand.

“See ya.”

The three men disappeared from view.

“Hey, you! What do you mean, ‘see ya’? Help Kazutaka! Hey, help him up!”

There was no reply. Ren was worried about Kazutaka. His wrist had to be hurting badly from being pulled by the handcuffs. Ren’s heart was racing with fear.

“Kazutaka, hang in there! I’m coming up right now to help you!”

Kazutaka didn’t respond, possibly from being in too much pain to talk. Ren looked side to side, trying to determine which bank was closer. As he started swimming, a thundering boom came from the bridge. Pieces of something rained down. Ren was afraid that there might have been an accident or an explosion

near Kazutaka. He was about to resume swimming when he saw a man falling towards the river.

“Whoa!”

It was the man holding the replica of the Teardrop of the Nile. The man fell into the water and surfaced within seconds but he sank again splashing wildly. It looked like he couldn’t swim.

Ren glared at the spot where the man had sunk. Ren called out to him but he was already busy with the important task of rescuing Kazutaka. *I don’t have time to help this guy*, Ren thought to himself, and began swimming again. At that moment, Ren heard a gentle voice calling to him from bridge railing.

“Ren! Are you down there?”

“Yuri?!”

“Kazutaka-san is okay. These two men will help him.”

“What two men?”

Kazutaka’s body was not swaying any more. Something that looked like a belt had been placed under his armpits. Ren then saw four arms grab Kazutaka’s clothes.

“Yuri! Who're those guys?”

“Friends of the man who fell into the river.”

Fuwa leaned over the bridge railing and smiled angelically. A bearded face appeared next to Fuwa. It was Todo. Then another face popped up. Brown haired, it was Toshi.

“Ren, we’ll toss down a rope. Can you tie it around the guy who fell into the river?”

“Do you want me to help him?”

“Tie the rope around him, so he won’t drown. I’ll tie this end right here.”

Ren saw Kazutaka being lifted up and the attaché case wedged free. Ren had thought that he'd secured the attaché case by wrapping a belt around it. He wondered why the case had opened at such a crucial moment.

All’s well that ends well. Kazutaka was safe now. There was nothing to worry about. Ren grabbed their attacker, who was bobbing up and down, and gave him the end of the rope.

“See ya.”

With that, Ren started swimming toward the bank. When he reached the shore, Fuwa, Todo, Toshi, and Kazutaka were waiting there.

“Ren!”

Kazutaka ran to him, his face wet from tears. They hugged each other, the attaché case a barrier between them. It was difficult to embrace with an opened attaché case getting in the way.

“Why did it open? I thought the belts were strong enough. True, the spring around the hinges was quite strong, but I used two belts.”

“They cut one belt in the van. They almost cut through the second one, too.”

Kazutaka put the attaché case on the ground, kneeling down.

“Look, right here.”

The attaché case had scratches which must have been left as the men attempted to cut through the leather.

“I see. Hanging by your left hand must have hurt a lot.”

Ren tried to give him another hug, but Todo came over and shoved his stocky body between Ren and Kazutaka.

“What’s up, Todo-san?”

“Listen up, Ren. If you had both jumped from 35 feet and hit the water, Kazutaka’s wrist would have broken from the weight of the attaché case. Human bones are more fragile than metal. You may be an expert on iron and other metal, but you don’t know much about the human body. If you put Kazutaka-san in such danger again, my strong left hand will have to teach you a lesson.”

“What do you mean, Todo-san?”

Toshi then came over and inserted himself between Todo and Kazutaka.

“We passed each other. I called out your name really loudly, but you

completely ignored me. When you focus on something, you can't see or hear anything else, Ren."

"Huh? We passed each other? Really?"

"Yeah. On our way out, Todo-san and I became worried and decided to turn around. When we got back to the hotel, chairs started falling."

Yuri joined the group, gracefully wedging himself between Toshi and Kazutaka. Ren felt that the distance between Kazutaka and himself had gotten so much larger. There were now three men between Kazutaka and Ren. "I practically totaled our expensive R.V."

"What happened to the R.V.?"

"I drove it because someone ran away and disappeared, Ren. What were you going to do without a vehicle? You knew Kazutaka-san couldn't run. Look at what's happened."

The R.V. had a large dent on its side, which looked like a gouge made by a large file. The bits and pieces that had rained down while Ren was still in the river must have been pieces of the side mirror and lamps from the R.V.

"The bad boys freaked out and stopped, so the fact I couldn't drive the R.V. well actually helped this time. Thanks to my bad driving, we rescued Kazutaka-san."

Toshi had a wry grin on his face.

"The chief swerved drastically the moment he saw those three men and crashed right into the guardrail. I almost thought that he was trying to run them over."

Todo started laughing and clapping his hands.

"That's exactly what I thought, too, runaway R.V., scraping its body against the guardrail with sparks flying all around. One of them got so scared that he jumped into the river."

"I wouldn't use my precious R.V. to run anybody over. I may use it to get someone's attention, though."

All five of them laughed in unison. "Help me!" Down in the river, the man who

couldn’t swim was calling for help. One of his buddies replied.

“Big bro, we’ll get you a boat.”

“Get me a life preserver first, idiot,” the big brother yelled back miserably.

“Shall we go back? Toshi-kun, it looks like scrap now but can you drive the van?”

“Sure. But you should take those wet clothes off, Ren. We can’t get the inside of the R.V. all wet.”

“All right, all right.”

“How is he going to get into the hotel?”

Fuwa placed his arm gently around Kazutaka’s shoulder and answered the question.

“Don’t worry. We’ve got some changes of clothes inside the R.V. They may not fit perfectly, though. Well, Kazutaka-san. Please take good care of Ren.”

“Ah, huh?”

“As you just saw, Ren tends to get really preoccupied. Once he’s focused on something, he doesn’t see or hear anything else. But he’s sturdy, upright and reliable. He’s a good man for long-lasting relationships. Isn’t that right, Ren?”

“You think I’m made of stainless steel?”

Fuwa made it sound like a joke but actually he was trying to encourage Kazutaka. Kazutaka, on the other hand, looked blank. Obviously Fuwa’s message hadn’t gotten through.

Although the team had lost the replica, they had survived the danger. Ren felt relieved. When Kazutaka had been snatched, Ren had been deadly worried. While Kazutaka dangled in the air, Ren’s heart had ached. All that drama was over now. Ren was happy to be with his friends in the R.V. again. Todo and Toshi had actually gone all the way to the train station. But once there, they'd rented a car and headed back. They must have had a hunch. They saw Kazutaka being abducted right as they got back to the hotel. They'd also seen Ren running after the van and Fuwa driving away in the R.V. without the appropriate license, so they decided to follow them all.

Although so gentle in terms of looks and attitude, Fuwa was actually quite bold and daring. All of the lights on the left side of the R.V. were broken. It had a huge dent as well. Bud had purchased the vehicle but Fuwa was willing to sacrifice it.

“How’s your hand, Kazutaka?”

“It’s all right, Ren. Don’t worry about that.”

Ren clicked his tongue, thinking that there was no way Kazutaka’s hand could be all right. His left wrist had been supporting his whole body. And since Kazutaka had jumped, there had to have been extra strain. Ren might not know much about the strength of human bones but he knew he couldn’t take Kazutaka’s statement at face value.

“You may not be feeling any pain right now because you're still in shock. You’d better go see a doctor and get an x-ray. Otherwise, you might feel it when it rains. That’d be horrible, wouldn’t it?”

“Okay, okay.”

“I don’t trust such a quick answer. I’ll take you to a doctor myself.”

“Ren, I’m not a child.”

Ren felt that he had some right to worry about Kazutaka’s health and safety. He also felt that he should have some say as well. When the two of them decided to jump, Kazutaka had said, “I love you.” But that had been under special circumstances and Kazutaka might not remember. But to Ren, that statement made Kazutaka as important as himself. Sometimes, Kazutaka’s pain might hurt Ren more than his own.

“Weren’t you afraid while you were strangling the driver, Kazutaka?”

“Oh, I don’t remember. I was desperate.”

“You hit the other one with the attaché case. Do you think that you knocked him unconscious?”

“Yeah, I think so. He might be still sleeping in that van.”

“You're quite brave when it comes down to it, huh?”

“I didn’t want you to fall from a moving car, Ren.”

Ren could see the love in Kazutaka's eyes. Kazutaka fought his hardest no matter the odds. Although Kazutaka was always smiling, Ren could see how tough his spirit was.

"The attaché case came in handy. I guess I didn't use it for its intended purpose, though."

"Shall we keep it as a memento?"

"Once it's closed, it won't open. Once it's open, it won't close. This case has been nothing but trouble. But I've spent several days with it; it's kind of grown on me. It's almost cute, isn't it?"

Kazutaka and Ren were sitting on the floor of the R.V. Todo was watching them with a smile while Fuwa was making coffee for everyone.

"Ren, let's drink to you for swimming in winter. Here you go."

"Thank you."

"This one's for you, Kazutaka-san. You've done well."

"Ah, thank you."

"Sorry, Todo-san. We don't have any tea."

"It's okay. Thank you."

After sipping his coffee, Ren gave a little sneeze. Kazutaka stretched out his arm to grab a blanket from the cot and placed it over Ren's shoulders. It was only a small gesture but Ren was happy.

How wonderful it would be, Ren thought, *if I could spend every day feeling Kazutaka's mellow warmth*.

The first few hours that he'd known him, Ren had thought Kazutaka was childlike and helpless. After a while, Ren had changed his opinion and thought Kazutaka was not as meek as he looked. It wasn't that Kazutaka was weak but that Kazutaka's strength didn't really show. The group had spent a long time with Kazutaka in the R.V. and on the ferry. Everyone had become fond of Kazutaka. It was only natural that Todo and Toshi, worrying about him, came back.

Kazutaka didn't look like anyone special, but a man like him was hard to come by, Ren thought. As Ren secured the attaché case again with a band, Ren secretly said thanks to the case.

Thanks to this attaché case, I got to spend time with Kazutaka. Because I couldn't cut the handcuffs or unlock the locks, I've been with him the whole time. I thank titanium and chromium for that.

Ren even thanked the metal components.

A comment had been uploaded by Bud to the jewelry site.

It said that "The blue teardrop isn't in Japan anymore."

That was all it said in English, but Kazutaka wouldn't be a target of theft rings any more. Comments made by Bud were deemed to be true and credible by thieves. In the matter of an hour, there were several comments backing Bud's statement.

"Many pieces of tanzanite were sighted in Hong Kong. Reported by an appraiser."

"The amount of carats is uncertain, but the shape is the same as we have on our database. Very close resemblance."

"Reported by an informant: The blue teardrop in Hong Kong may have a French owner."

"Urgent! Rumor has it that the blue teardrop will be auctioned off in Hong Kong. Click the link for details."

Many jewelry people had uploaded information.

"How do these people know? They're not directly involved, are they?"

"It's like a game to them. The participants are all enjoying this and thieves will make plans based on this information."

"Wow..."

"I have a hunch that the real Teardrop of the Nile is not in Hong Kong."

"I thought Shīno had it with him."

“Someone is saying that the amount of carats is uncertain, right? I know the writer. His information is always reliable.”

“Where is the real stuff then?”

“The British Museum denied the theft publicly. I assume the jewelry is still being kept in a vault at the British Museum. I think that is most likely the situation. When the thieves make their moves based on information, the police can go after them. See? Read this comment. ‘Participants wanted for a Hong Kong auction.’ This one must be written by the authorities. The police sometimes catch thieves who take the bait.”

“When there is a rumor that a famous piece of jewelry has been stolen, a lot of people become excited, huh?”

“You can say that again. It’s like a sport for adults.”

Ren, still fidgeting with the sensor key for the handcuffs, picked up Fuwa’s magazine and flipped through some pages.

“It’s only a mineral...twenty billion yen for this... Um. There’s something wrong with all this.”

Ren apparently was not interested in jewelry. Ren tilted his head and traced the English article with his finger.

“See. It says here that ornaments such as the Teardrop of the Nile weren’t worth much in ancient times. Monetary value wasn’t important then. Those who wore them were shamans or oracles. Those ancient people thought that stones with mysterious colors harnessed spiritual power.”

“In those days, nobody thought about selling gemstones for money, I suppose.”

In the meantime, Fuwa and Ren were treating Kazutaka like a prince. They were feeding him sandwiches, wiping his mouth, *etc.* Kazutaka felt like a nobleman.

“Fuwa-san, when is Bud coming back?”

“I threatened to come and get him unless he comes back, so he should return before too long, but he didn’t specify when. Don’t worry. I’ll make him visit your

students just as you asked.”

“Thank you so much.”

After the meal, Todo and Toshi left. They were going to catch the last flight home so that they could go back to work the next day. Fuwa left the room in order to see them off.

Kazutaka felt self-conscious alone with Ren. Ren's attitude hadn't changed or anything. Kazutaka was beginning to regret that he had said, “I love you” to Ren. *I shouldn’t have said that*, Kazutaka thought to himself. Kazutaka was nervous and tense, wondering what Ren was thinking. Since Ren wasn't one to show his emotions, Kazutaka couldn’t tell.

“Hey, Ren.”

“What is it? Wanna take a bath? Need the toilet? Or would you like to go to sleep? I can cut the threads of your clothes, if you need to take them off.”

Ren took out a pair of scissors and a utility knife. He'd need these tools to take off Kazutaka’s clothes.

“I’ll just take a bath and change clothes when I get home.”

“The commotion has subsided thanks to the comment posted by Bud. You should take a bath and refresh yourself. We can roll your shirt down to your left wrist. That way, you can leave your left hand and the attaché case out of the bathtub.”

Judging from Ren’s casual demeanor, he might not even remember Kazutaka’s confession of love. Kazutaka felt his tension ease a little. He decided to ask Ren to help him bathe.

Ren went into the bathroom. Kazutaka heard the hot water filling up the bathtub. Ren called to Kazutaka, letting him know that the bath was ready. Kazutaka walked into the bathroom, holding the attaché case against his chest. He took off his pants, socks, and underwear.

Kazutaka then unbuttoned his shirt, pulled his right arm out of the sleeve, and pulled the shirt down to his left wrist. Ren helped him take off the T-shirt, leaving Kazutaka naked except for the shirt around his left wrist, which was handcuffed

to the attaché case. Kazutaka was prepared for this but couldn't help feeling embarrassed. He turned his back to Ren and stepped slowly into the bathtub.

"Thank you, Ren. You can set the attaché on the floor. I'll manage the rest."

"You can't wash your body like that."

"Just being in the tub is good enough."

"I'll wash your body for you."

Ren picked up a bottle of body wash supplied by the hotel and squatted down by the tub.

"If you try to wash me, the attaché case will get wet."

"Doesn't matter. Sit on the rim of the bathtub. I'll get your back first."

"Okay."

Kazutaka sat down on the edge of the bathtub as Ren suggested. The floral scent of the soap filled the air inside the bathroom. Kazutaka felt strange. He felt Ren's fingers at his side. A little bit to the right of his armpit, just by his shoulder blade. Kazutaka then heard Ren's calm voice.

"It looks red right here. The attaché case must have hit this spot."

"I don't remember. All that fighting and running around. I had no time to feel pain."

"You're right."

Being naked and having someone wash your body is a graceless situation. When there was a pause in the conversation, Kazutaka felt awkward. He had to say something in an attempt to cover his embarrassment.

"This is the first time I've ever had someone else wash my body like this."

"I've never washed anyone like this, either."

Ren's reply was far from being romantic.

"Did you and Fuwa have something going on?"

"We had a lot of things between us, but that's all in the past."

There was a silence. When Ren was finished washing Kazutaka's back, he

placed a mat down next to the bathtub.

“Turn around and put your feet on the mat. I’ll wash your front.”

“You don’t have to wash me there.”

“Don’t worry. I see mine every day. I’m not at the age to get excited just by looking at other peoples’ property anymore.”

Kazutaka thought it might convey the wrong idea if he hesitated for too long. Kazutaka mentally prepared himself to go along with Ren and turn around.

Ren casually washed Kazutaka’s front. From his neck to his shoulders, from chest to abdomen, and groin, thigh, and inner thighs, Ren maintained the same pressure the whole time. Lastly, Ren knelt down to wash the bottom of Kazutaka’s feet. As Kazutaka watched Ren’s shoulders, he thought that he didn’t look like a person washing another person’s body. Ren seemed so businesslike.

“You have nice feet.”

Ren was holding Kazutaka’s right ankle.

Ren lifted Kazutaka’s foot, pulled his head away a little, and examined Kazutaka’s foot as though appraising its value. Ren shook Kazutaka’s ankle a couple of times and then tapped on his calf with a finger. Ren now looked like a craftsman who was checking out some tools.

“You know, it’s my foot. Not a machine.”

“I know. This is a good foot. When a job requires a lot of standing hours, they say the calcium level responds and strengthens your bones. Your muscles are naturally seasoned as well. I can tell that this is the foot of a person who spends many hours standing at work. Nice shape, too. It’s perfect.”

Ren’s observation, to Kazutaka, was a bit strange. Still, Kazutaka was happy getting a compliment from Ren. Kazutaka got carried away and made an off-color joke.

“I haven’t been seasoning this leg, though.”

Ren nonchalantly stretched an arm toward Kazutaka’s groin and examined his virile member.

“It’s well built. Not bad. I can’t tell about its precision and durability until I test it. But overall, it’s a winsome fellow.”

The way Ren described Kazutaka’s manhood sounded weird. Kazutaka started laughing.

Ren had said he and Fuwa “had a lot of things” between them. If that was the case, Ren should show a more emotional reaction to another man’s penis, Kazutaka thought. Instead, all Ren talked about was its “precision and durability,” nothing to overtly imply an ulterior motive or a sexual feeling.

So blunt, but it was typical of Ren. Kazutaka felt at ease and didn’t think too much of it until Ren began to examine his “precision and durability” with his palm. A man’s member sometimes doesn’t have a conscience and reacts rather bluntly. Kazutaka was anticipating its reaction to Ren’s touch. Feeling self-conscious, Kazutaka tried covering his groin with his right hand but Ren pushed it away.

“When was the last time you went on a date with your girlfriend?”

Kazutaka didn’t understand what Ren was talking about. A few seconds later, however, Kazutaka realized Ren was asking him when he had last exercised his third leg.

“I don’t have a girlfriend. I've never gone out with a girl.”

“I see. What about a boyfriend?”

“I don’t have one at the moment,” Kazutaka replied, trying not to sound too needy, but still remaining honest. Ren frowned.

“When was the last time you did some maintenance?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You need to do regular polishing. It’ll get rusty otherwise.”

Ren was right about that. But Kazutaka didn’t think he needed instructions in that from anybody. It was none of Ren’s business how Kazutaka handled his parts. It was true that his part had been neglected for a long time. It didn’t function automatically with subtle cues. Its existence was all but forgotten.

“Why are you asking me such a question, Ren?”

“Everything needs to be properly used and maintained in accordance with its purpose.”

“The maintenance system and schedule should be up to the owner, shouldn’t it?”

“This part is special because it can be shared with someone else.”

Kazutaka couldn’t continue this conversation. While they were talking, Kazutaka’s penis had become engorged and almost ready for use.

They were in an interesting situation. Two men in a bathroom, one was handcuffed and the other was fully dressed and checking out the former’s groin. On top of it all, Ren was asking Kazutaka when he got laid the last time. Ren was touching Kazutaka’s penis and acting as though he was merely inspecting a piece of machinery. It didn’t seem that Ren thought this was a strange situation, though.

Kazutaka wondered if he was being too self-conscious. It felt nice to be touched down there but it was awkward, too. Since Ren was acting so natural, Kazutaka thought he might be the one who was confused over nothing. “I want to rinse off the soap. Can I get back in the tub?”

“I self-manipulate regularly, once a week. You need to lubricate the system frequently, or you’ll become distracted and make mistakes. Safety management starts from the waist-down. That’s my slogan and it’s on the wall at my factory.”

“You gotta be kidding.”

“You’re right, just a joke.”

Ren started massaging Kazutaka’s shaft. Now that he was done with his examination, Ren seemed to be testing its functionality. Kazutaka thought this was going too far for a joke.

“Ren, that’s not a piece of machinery. That’s my body.”

“Not necessarily yours. This is mine, too.”

“How so?”

“You said that you loved me.”

“I was desperate.”

“I could tell you were serious. In life or death kind situations, people usually don’t lie or make things up. Besides, you are honest by nature. Look, your part is telling its own truth.”

Ren held Kazutaka’s dick tightly and Kazutaka squirmed.

“This is saying that it likes me. Isn’t that right?”

“Ren, wait.”

Kazutaka tried to remember how long it had been since his dick had been touched by someone else. The last time had been when Kazutaka was still in college. So, it had been five, or maybe even seven years ago. Kazutaka couldn't recall the feel of shared physical love.

Ren stroked it gently as though fine-tuning a delicate tool. Kazutaka trembled and lurched. His soapy bottom slipped and Kazutaka fell backwards into the tub with a big splash. “Whoa!”

With the sudden immersion, Kazutaka totally lost his composure. The attaché case fell onto his chest, which was pushed to the side by Ren. “Ah, Ren!”

Ren came into the bathtub, climbing over Kazutaka. Kazutaka was in the tub, up to his earlobes. Kazutaka sank under water as Ren kissed him. Actually, Kazutaka’s head was still above the water but his self-control was sunk.

“Ren, what are you doing? Get away from me.”

“You're not used to this sort of thing, I suppose.”

“No. What am I saying? What are you thinking, hopping into the tub with your clothes on?”

Lukewarm water sloshed about for a moment before something hard said hi to Kazutaka’s member.

“Ren, yours is touching mine. Ren, they’re touching.”

“Don’t mind that. Everybody’s is pretty much the same.”

“It’s not about minding or not minding. Whoa, it’s slippery. Careful, Ren.”

“Don’t worry. I’m an expert.”

“You shouldn’t do things like this with someone you don’t even like! Runaway lust only brings regret. By then it’s too late.”

“Runaway lust is only natural. Rather than regretting what I didn’t do, I like to do what I want.”

“Ren!”

Kazutaka desperately pushed Ren away. He placed the attaché case between his legs to protect himself.

“Think before you go on. Everyone has lust but someone always gets hurt afterward. Think of...your teacher or parents for a minute before acting on your lust. You're young and I’m not saying you shouldn’t have sex. But love doesn’t grow from curiosity and lust!”

Kazutaka had said this many times to his students but knew it might not be convincing to Ren. But Kazutaka didn’t want to get hurt by going all the way due to circumstances and the heat of the moment.

Ren pulled the attaché case away from Kazutaka’s groin and set it aside. Ren pressed his knee into Kazutaka’s groin.

“If you like somebody, you have to show it. That’s my way. If you really don’t want to go through with this, Kazutaka, you need to convince me. But none of that talk of yours that you use on middle schoolers.”

“Ren, wait. I can’t think of a good convincing argument right now.”

“Your first argument was ‘you shouldn’t do things like this with someone you don’t even like,’ right? Let me tell you something. I love you.”

“When did you have time to develop such feelings?”

“While you talked in your sleep.”

“Talked in my sleep? What did I say?”

“You said, ‘that section will be on the exam!’ I’ve been watching your words, actions, and demeanor. Accurate observation is a basic principle of mine. I think you're cute. I have an employee at my factory. He’s young and handsome. I have never wanted to touch him like I’m doing to you now. I know you don’t dislike me. You've already told me that you love me.”

Kazutaka couldn’t think of any counterargument. Ren slowly leaned into Kazutaka and pressed his lips against Kazutaka’s cheek. “I’ve found something we can share. With tender loving care, a little part will become very useful. If I neglect it, I’ll regret it for sure. Give me a chance to polish your part, Kazutaka.”

The water drops trickling down Ren's face made him look extremely sexy. Kazutaka felt that they had come to the point of no return.

“All right. You can rub me any way you want, Ren.” The first gentle kiss took place in the steamy, foggy bathroom.

Bubbles came out of the attaché case as it was dragged under water. Soap melted in the tub, making the water an erotic milky color.

Ren wasn’t lying when he said he was an expert. Kazutaka was turned on. Ren caressed Kazutaka while kissing his chest. Kazutaka’s body was loosened up by the tub water, and Ren’s fingers were doing their work. When Ren pressed on Kazutaka’s clenched star directly, Kazutaka felt a strong rush tightening his whole body.

“No, not there. Ren, no.”

“Can I put it in?”

“The tub is so small.”

“It’s better if there’s no way out.”

In the bathtub, Kazutaka weighed less. Ren easily put him on all fours and penetrated Kazutaka’s ring with his hot cock. Since it had not been used for so long, Kazutaka was tight. He felt a burning sensation at first as Ren pushed his way in. Soon, the pain gradually subsided and different sensations began running through his body.

Ren and Kazutaka had lived without knowing each other for over 20 years. They had grown up and began working without knowledge of each other’s existence. They were now accepting each other completely and were passionate about the contact they shared. They were happy.

Ren’s torso now was covering Kazutaka’s back. The water undulated to Ren’s moves. It started as small ripples but the water gradually rose to Ren’s thrusts, becoming almost like a tidal wave.

The attaché case was completely immersed, resting on the bottom of the tub. Kazutaka felt frustrated that he couldn’t use his left hand freely.

“Ren. Ahh, Ren. Ugh.”

Kazutaka’s voice sounded sexy, echoing in the small bathroom. Ren’s thrusts got harder and faster. Water was splashed everywhere. Water shot out of a small gap between Kazutaka’s groin and the water surface like a squirt gun, surging from his bottom and up his back like a tsunami, spilling over the tub rim.

As Kazutaka was supporting himself with his right hand on the tub, he couldn’t touch himself.

“Ren, I can’t hold it any longer. I need to come, Ren.”

“Do you want to come to bed?”

“No, that’s not it. A bed would be nice but I just have to come.”

Ren chuckled against Kazutaka’s shoulder and moved his hand toward Kazutaka’s cock. Ren held Kazutaka’s cock softly but firmly and pressed his finger across its tip, pulling back its foreskin further. Kazutaka clamped his thighs together in response to the overwhelming sensation. The skin around the tip of a penis was very thin. Kazutaka’s abdominal muscles trembled as electricity surged

through him at Ren’s touch.

Ren felt the same surge.

“Am...uh.”

Kazutaka heard a moaning voice behind him. Ren began stroking Kazutaka skillfully.

Kazutaka felt Ren's warmth on his back. Ren’s left hand was supporting Kazutaka’s torso. Kazutaka heard Ren’s heavy breaths and felt Ren’s face moving back and forth over his shoulders.

“Ren. I’m coming.”

“Okay.”

Kazutaka’s loins wanted it and his back begged for it. Less than a minute later, Kazutaka came. Kazutaka sank into the water, panting through the afterglow. Ren put his lips on Kazutaka’s ear.

“That was wonderful.”

Ren bucked his hips softly one more time, indicating Kazutaka had a nice ass. Ren appeared to be a veteran. Kazutaka felt secure and closed his eyes.

“Let’s go to bed, Ren.”

“Good idea.”

Ren didn’t pull out right away, taking it slowly for Kazutaka. The two were swaying back and forth gently with the movements of the water. Feeling comfortable, Kazutaka thought Ren was sweet.

Since the worst Sunday ever, a lot had happened to turn Kazutaka’s life upside down. But if that was all a preparation for becoming one with Ren, it was worth it, Kazutaka thought.

“I’m falling asleep here, Ren.”

“Shall we get out?”

Ren held the attaché case and Kazutaka held onto the tub rim, swaying slowly and raising himself up.

“Our clothes and the case are all wet.”

Ren carefully dried Kazutaka with a towel.

Water had gotten inside the case. When set down on the floor in upright position, water puddled out. Ren used his knife to cut off soaking wet dress shirt and T-shirt Kazutaka was wearing on his wrist. Now all Kazutaka was wearing was the attaché case.

Ren helped Kazutaka to bed, holding him from behind. Ren put a towel next to a pillow and set the attaché case on it.

“This case is really a nuisance.”

Ren glared at the case as he continued drying Kazutaka.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. Think of it as part of me until we can remove the handcuffs.”

Kazutaka shook his hand and the handcuff chain swung. Just then, there was a small beep followed by a click. The inner ring of the handcuff moved and expanded to fit to the outer ring. There was another click at the end. It happened so quietly and casually, Kazutaka couldn’t recognize the fact that the handcuffs were open.

“No way...”

He had wanted to remove the handcuffs so badly. Now that they were off, Kazutaka couldn’t believe it.

“Ren, the handcuffs came off.”

“Huh?”

Kazutaka held out his now free left hand. Ren's eyes widened.

“You gotta be kidding.”

Ren looked at Kazutaka’s hand and then at the handcuffs. He quickly picked up the sensor key from the table. Ren looked at the display and shouted.

“Oh...the display has changed. A-ha! I get it now!”

“The display now says ‘Urgent!’ It must be because the handcuffs were under water! The machine sensed there was an emergency and automatically unlocked

itself!”

Remembering all the trouble they had gone through, Kazutaka felt faint and fell backwards onto the bed. Ren jumped onto the bed, lying down next to Kazutaka.

“Look at this, Kazutaka. ‘U12’ must be an error code. It probably means the water. When the handcuffs sense a lot of water, it assumes the owner is in some kind of trouble and unlocks itself. It’s a safety measures so that the owner won’t drown from the weight of cargo when thrown overboard from a ship.”

“What have I been struggling for?”

Ren hugged Kazutaka and replied with a hearty laughter.

“I know. The god of the attaché case has given you this burden so that you’d have to stay with me.”

“Easy for you to say, Ren.”

“Think about it. If we had managed to remove the cuffs so easily in the beginning, you wouldn’t have spent this much time with me. We’ve been together only because you were connected to the attaché case by the handcuffs, right?”

True, all this wouldn’t have happened otherwise.

“So the attaché case brought us romance?”

“That’s right.”

They looked at each other and laughed. Ren placed Kazutaka’s left hand in his. Ren raised their hands up to his face and kissed Kazutaka’s wrist gently. Ren closed his eyes and then whispered happily, “This is great. I’m so glad that you're free.”

Kazutaka thought Ren looked quite bewitching.

Kazutaka told Shīno that he'd lost the attaché case. Shīno nodded slightly.

“The important thing is that you got home safely, Yui. Don’t worry about the case.”

Shīno looked relieved and smiled a little. He wasn't quibbling. Kazutaka thought Shīno was being sincere.

Ren and Fuwa-san told Kazutaka not to trust Shīno. But seeing him in person, Kazutaka thought that Shīno must have been really worried about his friend's plight. Maybe Kazutaka was being a pushover again.

"Shīno, what was the real reason you asked me to carry the attaché case? Can you tell me?"

Shīno got up and walked toward the windows. He then set up the coffee maker and turned on its switch. The aroma of coffee filled the reception room. There was low music on in the background. The background music of the store was always classical music, which was Shīno's favorite genre. They were in the room which Shīno normally used for important business meetings or consultation with his clients. But today, Kazutaka and Shīno were alone in the room. In fact, Shīno had told one of his clerks "not to put any phone calls through" before they'd entered it.

Shīno poured some coffee and set the cup in front of Kazutaka. Then Shīno sat down opposite him.

"Did they explain things to you while you were in captivity?"

"They told me about the contents of the attaché case."

"So, you saw the kidnappers then. What were they like?"

"They were professional thieves."

"Wasn't it Bud West and his group?"

Kazutaka bit his tongue. Shīno snickered a little and muttered, "On the mark, huh?"

"Yui, I'm not going to ask you how you stayed safe even after being kidnapped or why you didn't bring back the attaché case. I knew that Bud West was gathering information on his website and monitoring my jewelry store. So I suspected Bud West would come after the jewels. All of them could have been arrested. I'm not going to report the whole thing to the police or anything because you've come back safely. You should thank me for that."

“Why should I thank you?”

“It looks like you made friends with them.”

Kazutaka clamped his lips shut. It was true that he made friends with the group of thieves, but Shīno’s argument sounded illogical and absurd.

“You knew what was going to happen. Yet you still put me in the transport, Shīno. That wasn’t cool. I even thought that we couldn’t stay friends anymore.”

Shīno looked down and remained silent for a while. Then he nodded and said that he understood.

“I couldn’t think of any other way. Multiple theft rings had their eyes on the Teardrop of the Nile. I just assumed and hoped that Bud would get to it first because he is known for moving quickly and being very thorough.”

Shīno didn’t want the jewelry stolen by just anyone.

It was a world-renowned transporter who'd brought in the Teardrop of the Nile. Whether it was genuine or not didn’t matter. Since Shīno took the order, he simply wanted to get the job done properly.

If anyone else had done the transport job, whether it was Shīno, a clerk, or a professional courier, they would have gone through exactly what Kazutaka had.

“I don’t think what you did was right, Shīno. You know, getting involved in transportation of stolen goods. When you've got risky items, you should choose another way other than asking me to carry them. You should have asked the police to come and get them or just turned down the job.”

“It’s not a matter of right or wrong... That’s not the point, Yui.”

“What is the point then?”

Shīno leaned forward and began his explanation.

“I didn’t believe the museum’s announcement from the start. The Teardrop of the Nile was stolen on its way from America to England. The real stuff must be in the safe deposit vault of a bank, at the residence of a wealthy individual, or in someone’s luggage.”

“Bud and his team believed it must be at the museum.”

“If that was true, Bud would post it on his own site. Even Bud doesn’t know exactly where it is. He hopes, more than anyone else, that the Teardrop of the Nile will be returned intact without being disassembled into smaller pieces. I don’t know what you think, but I feel the same way as Bud.”

“You wish to return the Teardrop of the Nile to its rightful owner?”

“Of course.”

Shīno held his coffee cup and started laughing.

“But I want to be the one who returns it. I don’t want Bud to get that honor.”

“They told me that you charge excessive commissions as a resale agent.”

“Do you think you can stop people from stealing? We can’t, right? Someone steals something and brings it to someone else. With an important piece like the Teardrop of the Nile, the best we can hope is that the jewelry will end up in the hands of someone who will keep it in its original state. Thieves can’t purchase insurance on their loot. I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

“Don’t you feel responsible for getting me involved in this whole mess? And the taunting log on the message board that said, ‘I wonder if it’s true. :-D’. I was really irritated by that.”

“I didn’t write that one.”

“Liar. Who else could it be? Besides, what you had was a replica, too, right?”

“Yup. I’ve failed in finding the Teardrop of the Nile and lost credibility in the industry. I’ve also lost a friend. I’ve lost everything. Please don’t nag me anymore.”

“Let me tell you something, Shīno.”

“Don’t tell me that you’ll forgive if I apologize. Not even a word of it. You've always been accepting and understanding. I’ve always hated that about you.”

“If that’s how you always felt, then you haven’t lost a friend, have you? You are contradicting yourself, Shīno.”

Just then, the cell phone in Kazutaka’s chest pocket rang. It was his ring tone indicating a message had been received.

“Ah, I’ve got a message. Excuse me.”

Kazutaka took out his cell phone. He tilted his head as he checked the display. It was signed as BW, probably an e-mail was from Bud West. It was strange to receive a message from Bud because Kazutaka hadn’t given him his email address. When Kazutaka read the body of text, he got even more bewildered.

The only text in the body was “300,000,000.” The photo was attached; it was a picture of Shīno holding a square shaped case in the lobby of some glass-paneled building. Based on the background, it certainly looked like a bank.

“Shīno...”

“What?”

“Did you bring the ransom money when you went to Narita?”

“What ransom money?”

Deadpan, Shīno crossed his arms defiantly.

“How much did you withdraw from the bank, Shīno?”

“I said I didn’t bring any ransom money, stupid.”

“It looks like Bud has discovered where you withdrew the money from. He sent me a picture of you at the bank. Here, you see?”

“A guy told me to bring some money. He said he would send me your cut off hand otherwise. I knew Bud would never do such a thing. If you had been kidnapped by someone else, I thought the best solution would be for Bud to come after you. That’s why I put the message on the board!”

Kazutaka started laughing. Shīno slammed the table in chagrin.

After all, the log on the message board had been written by Shīno. He'd worried about Kazutaka and decided to have Bud track him down. *Shīno is really twisted*, Kazutaka thought looking at the picture again.

Ken, the lookout, must have taken the picture. Kazutaka hadn’t met him but Fuwa had contacted Ken several times. When Shīno left home for Narita, Ken must have followed him and saw Shīno stop at the bank. But Ken didn’t know about the prank phone call Ren made demanding ransom money, so Ken hadn’t

thought it necessary to report it to his teammates. After Kazutaka parted from Fuwa, he must have found out that Shīno withdrew three hundred million yen from the bank. Yet the message came from Bud, which meant Fuwa and Bud were probably together now.

Shīno looked irritated. Bringing the coffee pot, he looked into Kazutaka's cup. He complained that Kazutaka hadn't drunk any of his coffee and poured himself a second cup.

"Anyways, I knew Bud wanted the Teardrop of the Nile badly. When there is a high-profile jewel out there, Bud gets obsessed. And when Bud gets a hold of the jewelry, there's a great chance it will be eventually returned to a museum. He refrains from accepting rewards, always acting like a hero. Also, Bud only gets involved in jobs where people aren't able to establish a criminal case in court."

"You don't like Bud, do you?"

"I hate him."

"How come?"

"It was five years ago, when my father was still alive. A famous stolen jewelry piece called the 'Great Legend' was brought in. My father had one of his employees transport it, and Bud intercepted it. Within three days, that employee was persuaded by Bud to join his team and never came back to work at our store. He was a very skilled appraiser. My father not only lost the jewelry but also a veteran appraiser to add insult to injury. I vowed to myself that I'd never allow Bud to trick me."

"Your father lost his appraiser, huh? Sorry to hear that."

"You've met Bud, haven't you? Did he leave a deep and unforgettable impression on you? Was he really charismatic?"

"Not really. He teaches at an English school near a train station. And, in reality, he is a struggling sculptor. Bud looked exactly like that. Not that charismatic at all."

"Maybe you are just oblivious, Yui."

"You're wrong about that, Shīno."

Although Kazutaka didn’t say this aloud, he knew he’d met someone else who was more attractive to him.

“I had no idea what had happened to you and your father in the past. Well, I think I’m going now. Oh, and I will never transport jewelry for you again. Next time you entrust jewelry to me, I’ll abscond with it.”

“I know you wouldn’t do anything like that, but I probably won’t ask you again.”

“Okay. Catch you later.”

Kazutaka left the reception room, thinking that he would probably always be a sucker.

Ren saw Kazutaka approaching. He felt weak just seeing him smile.

When he'd sent Kazutaka off, Ren had encouraged him to punch Shīno in the face and break off the relationship. Apparently, Kazutaka only had a friendly talk with Shīno. *Kazutaka is such a pushover*, Ren thought. *Considering what Kazutaka has gone through, he should be pissed at Shīno for the next 10 years at least*. Though frustrated, Ren got out of the car and opened the door for Kazutaka.

“How did it go?”

“I found out about all kinds of stuff. Shīno is not as bad as you may think.”

Ren regretted that he hadn’t gone instead of Kazutaka and given Shīno a few, or maybe even a few dozen punches.

“Shīno did bring three hundred million yen to Narita.”

“I suppose he told you that?”

“No, he denied it. But I got a message from Bud in the middle of our talk. See? Check this out.”

The screen on Kazutaka’s cell phone showed the picture of Shīno standing with an attaché case at a bank, looking apprehensive.

“Shīno got worried because of the threatening call you made. So he went to

his bank and withdrew the money before taking off for Hong Kong."

"Son of a gun. He shouldn't have deceived anybody if he was the type to get worried afterward, especially not a friend."

"Ren, let's not talk about Shīno anymore. I made it clear that I will not transport any jewelry for him again."

"That goes without saying."

"Where's the attaché case?"

"In the back of the car."

"Let's go home then, to my apartment."

It had been five days since they'd met. Since returning from northern Kyushu, Kazutaka had stayed at Ren's factory both yesterday and today. What had they been doing all this time? Naturally, they were doing what every new couple does. Kazutaka ditched work for the first time in his life and Ren closed the factory due to personal reasons for the first time since he succeeded his father as head of the business.

On Monday the following week, both of them would have to work extra hard to make up for the missed week.

When they arrived at his apartment, Kazutaka looked touched. His mailbox was filled to overflowing with letters and newspapers. Some had even dropped down to the ground.

"Oh, these are get-well-soon cards from my students."

Those who couldn't send messages electronically must have mailed letters instead. Many envelopes had cute illustrations on them.

"It's small and messy but come on in."

Kazutaka opened the door and Ren stepped inside. It was a little bit cluttered but not unpleasant. Quite a normal room for one lived in by a single man. The entrance way, a 4.5 and a 6 tatami mat room, and a kitchen. There were five bookcases, completely filled with books on education.

Kazutaka walked around, opening windows.

“It’s chilly but bear with me. I need to air this place out.”

The soft light of a winter afternoon shone in, stretching to the middle of the room, as he opened the curtains. There was a dried out Cup-o-Noodles on top of a table that was presumably used for working and dining. After a week’s absence, his Cup-o-Noodles had dried up and hardened.

“The Cup-o-Noodles is completely dry.”

“Oh, yeah. Just before going out, I had poured the hot water. Can you put it in the sink?”

Ren went to the kitchen. He put the contents into the trash, and rinsed out the container and put it on the dish rack.

“You are well-organized, Ren.”

“I’m just a worrier. Environmental safety begins with taking care of the drainage system. I have that slogan on the wall at my factory.”

“I thought your slogan was ‘safety management starts from the waist-down.'”

“You have a good memory.”

They laughed together and then they performed their now regular greeting. Their bodies were still apart. First, Kazutaka extended his left hand forward, palm up. Second, Ren touched it with his right hand. And if they were in the mood, there would be little pecks on the cheek. Kazutaka really enjoyed light kisses. Since Kazutaka looked so happy every time Ren kissed him softly on the cheek, Ren would oblige him excessively.

“On Sunday night, I finished work about nine o’clock. I took a shower and ate a Cup-o-Noodles. Then Yuri called.”

“At that time, I was blindfolded inside the R.V., wondering what was going to happen to me.”

It'd only been five days. Not much had changed around Ren and Kazutaka, but their lives had been turned upside down.

Ren came to Kazutaka and Kazutaka had responded to him. The last three days had been a series of fun, new discoveries about each other. They felt almost if they were breaking new ground in the language of love. They were doing and

feeling things they never had before.

“I hit the rock bottom last Sunday. But now a week later, I feel on top of the world.”

Softness and sweetness had been added to Kazutaka’s smile. Ren couldn’t help but laugh. Smiling all the time didn’t seem manly to Ren, but his father’s scolding voice didn’t boom in his head now.

Kazutaka would put some instant coffee into their mugs. Ren would then pour some hot water in. Next, Kazutaka would add some creamer to them and Ren would stir. That was how things were now between them.

“In a while, I’ll start closing the factory on Sundays.”

“That’ll be good. Then I can come over to see you or you can come visit me.”

“Or we can go someplace on Saturdays after work.”

“Overnight trips would be a nice change.”

Kazutaka’s cell phone rang on top of the desk.

“Oh, I’ve got a message. Excuse me, Ren.”

Kazutaka moved away quickly. Ren was left holding air in his arms.

Looking at the display, Kazutaka cocked his head.

“It’s from Bud but it’s in Japanese. I wonder what’s going on.”

Kazutaka read the message and turned to Ren.

“Do you think this message was written by Fuwa-san? Read it, Ren.”

If Fuwa had sent a message from Bud’s phone, those two must have made up. Ren took the cell phone. The first line read, “A decision has been made. Bud West is retiring.”

It seemed Fuwa had successfully persuaded Bud. Bud would no longer be engaged in the activities of recovering stolen goods to generate funds. The hero of justice, who took all kinds of risks, was finally retiring. However, the next line read, “Bud will quit his teaching job at the English conversation school in April. He will concentrate on studying sculpture.”

“What is Bud retiring from? I thought he will cease to be the Stone Hunter. Is he just quitting his teaching job?”

Then again, another sentence read, “The Stone Hunter’s site will shut down in a week.”

The message continued on to ask, “Kazutaka-san, do you need an English teacher, who can only speak English, at your workplace?”

Kazutaka tilted his head.

“Hiring a foreign teacher might be difficult. Nagomi Kyōshitsu has a pathetically small budget.”

At the end of the text, it said, “Bud says teaching as a volunteer is fine, too. If there is a convenience store nearby, it would be really convenient. That way, an ex-hotel concierge could get a part-time job there.”

The message was basically saying that Bud West and Yuri Fuwa were both retiring from the jewelry hunting business. They would also be quitting their regular jobs and would be moving to Kazutaka’s town, working as a volunteer and a part-time worker.

“Should I respond to this? First, volunteers are welcome... I can give you a recommendation to the board of education as a public school instructor. Wait. Can Bud read this? Well, Fuwa-san can translate it, right?”

“Sure.”

“There is a convenience store nearby. And there are many idle plots of land. You can lease 20 square yards of soil as vegetable patches for a thousand yen for three months. You can be self-sufficient as far as your vegetables. And...”

“That sounds really inviting. They might really move here,” Ren said.

“I think this is a nice place to live. Now, what else can I say? Let me see. Oh, I know. Shīno Jewelry is close by, so be careful. Done. What do you think, Ren?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Send.”

In a matter of minutes after Kazutaka’s reply, Bud sent another message.

“Ah, it’s in English this time. Let’s see... ‘I’m coming to your town right now.’ When he says ‘right now,’ do you think he means today?”

“What's he coming here for?”

“Wait. It also says, ‘I’m bringing a present for Ren.’ Did you tell Bud that you were coming here?”

“No. I didn’t tell anyone that I was at your place. Not even Yuri.”

“How did he know?”

“He’s got good instincts.”

Kazutaka paced around the room, wondering if he should meet Bud at the station, what he should do about tea and snacks, if Fuwa-san was coming along, and how he would communicate with Bud without being able to speak English. Then the phone rang again.

“Hello, this is Yui. Huh? Yeah, I’m all better now. Perfect. Uh-huh. Okay. Come on over. Your mother’s coming as well? Okay. Got it. Looking forward to seeing you.”

Kazutaka put the phone down.

“Sorry, Ren. A student is coming with her mother. They need career counseling.”

“Should I leave?”

“No, please stay. If Bud comes while they're here, I need you to talk with him.”

Then there was another phone call.

“Hello, this is Yui. Oh, Takuya-kun’s mother. What can I do for you? Oh, about the interview the other day? Did the school say anything? This is regarding a school recommendation? Uh-huh. Well... I see. Oh, don’t worry. There’s nothing to cry about. Um, Takuya-kun has locked himself in his room? Okay. I’ll send him a friendly text message on his cell phone. Call me again if there are any new developments.”

When Kazutaka finished the call, the phone rang again. It was as though someone had been waiting for that precise moment.

“Hello, this is Yui. Oh, Mr. Kobayashi. Yes, this is about a parent-teacher conference schedule. Oh, yes. Everyone’s times are set. Shall I fax you the schedule? Is tomorrow okay? I've got it.”

Kazutaka smiled as he put down the phone. He told Ren that it was always like this if Kazutaka missed school.

“So, the phone just keeps ringing like this?”

“Yeah. I was absent for a week. Right now, the children are probably spreading the word, ‘Mr. Yui is feeling well now.’ So, in a little while, a whole bunch of e-mails will start storming in.”

Just as Kazutaka predicted, e-mails started coming in every five minutes. The phone rang between times. Kazutaka had to call someone occasionally, too. It was all quite hectic.

Ren didn’t have any time to rest while he was working at the factory. But Kazutaka was now just as busy. Thirty minutes later, Ren took the cell phone from Kazutaka, turned it off, and threw it into the closet. Ren also turned on the answering machine for Kazutaka’s home phone.

“What are you doing, Ren?”

“I’m kissing you.”

Kazutaka burst out laughing. He responded understandingly to Ren’s selfish emotional needs.

“Shall I change the outgoing message on my answering machine?”

“How would you change it?”

“To saying, ‘Hello this is Yui,’” Kazutaka pretended to pick up a phone receiver. “We are kissing right now and I can’t come to the phone for a while. Please leave your name, number, and a brief message, and I’ll call you back...”

AFTERWARD

By Riuto Takeuchi

Ever since I stopped having year-end parties, I have gotten forgetful. I especially have a hard time remembering peoples' names and faces. For example, I get really nervous when I go to some club event related to dojinshi. For the life of me I cannot remember who some of the guests are, which puts me in a cold sweat. From the way they greet me, I can guess that we must have met or at least talked before. It's nice of them to say, "Hi" to me. I'm aware that not remembering them is quite rude. But, alas, I just can't remember. So, feeling sorry, I normally have to ask a rude question like: "I'm sorry, but may I ask who you are?"

In order to avoid any irreverent behavior, I have made up my mind to greet anyone who looks familiar. But this turned out to be the cause of mistakes at times. Just the other day, I saw a familiar lady while driving. I loudly said to her with a smile: "I'm coming to your house now. Should I give you a ride?" Her answer was, "No thank you." A few minutes later, at the house I was visiting, I saw the same lady in different clothes. "We just met near the train station, right?" Her answer was, "I don't think so." Oops. I had almost picked up a lady, who was a stranger. That's how bad my memory has become.

To my regret, I sometimes even forget the characters' names in my own novel. "Hmm. I forgot the name of the seme. What was it?" Things like this happen very often. If I mainly use their first names in the text, it's hard to remember their last names. My editor is extremely patient with me and tells me their names with a smile. In this novel, I sometimes couldn't remember Ren's last name. Incidentally, Ren's last name is Atobe.

In a hope of refining my memory skills, I threw a little year-end party to close out 2003. We will wait and see if it was effective. I thank you for your continuous support in the New Year.

キスと手錠

story
RIUTO TAKEUCHI
illustration
AKENO KITAHATA

A Kiss AND A Pair of Handcuffs

Kidnapping a man in the process of stealing jewels?!

Kazutaka was asked to transport some jewelry by a friend, Shino, a jeweler. Kazutaka got into an armored car dispatched by a security firm with his left wrist handcuffed to an attaché case. It should have been only ten minutes or so until the car got to the police station. But, alas! Kazutaka was kidnapped by terrorists who were after the jewelry! Then Ren came along. Ren was a proud craftsman who loved steel metal. Ren's mission was to remove the handcuffs from Kazutaka. While he felt repulsed by Ren, Kazutaka could also not help but be attracted to him.

YAOI | DRAMA | ROMANCE

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